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Spencer Bruntton.

“CORINNA”

“CORINNA”

A Study

By “RITA”

AUTHOR OF “DAME DURDEN,” “MY LORD CONCEIT,”
“TWO BAD BLUE EYES,” ETC. ETC.

In Three Volumes

VOL. III.



LONDON

JOHN & ROBERT MAXWELL

MILTON HOUSE, SHOE LANE, FLEET STREET

AND

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER I.

	PAGE
"HE WILL MAKE MUSIC FOR THE ANGELS IN HEAVEN" .	1

CHAPTER II.

ATHIRST FOR SLEEP, NOT LIFE	12
---------------------------------------	----

CHAPTER III.

"TO SUFFER WOES WHICH HOPE THINKS INFINITE" . .	26
---	----

CHAPTER IV.

A MARIYR'S MEMORY	49
-----------------------------	----

CHAPTER V.

	PAGE
THE PREY OF THE GODS	62

CHAPTER VI.

MADAME NINA AT HOME	79
-------------------------------	----

CHAPTER VII.

"A LAST MESSAGE".	89
---------------------------	----

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MESSAGE ANSWERED	103
--------------------------------	-----

“EDELWEISS.”

INTRODUCTION.

	PAGE
“THE DREAM”	111
“THE AWAKING”	118

CHAPTER I.

THE SNOWFLOWER	123
--------------------------	-----

CHAPTER II.

AS SHADOWS FALL	146
---------------------------	-----

CHAPTER III.

AWAKING	161
-------------------	-----

CHAPTER IV.

	PAGE
DIVIDED DUTY	185

CHAPTER V.

AN EXPERIMENT	206
-------------------------	-----

CHAPTER VI.

REMORSE	231
-------------------	-----

CHAPTER VII.

THE WITHERED FLOWER	252
-------------------------------	-----

CORINNA."

CHAPTER I.

"He will make music for the angels in heaven."

HE hours went on. The sun rose high in the heavens, and drove away the mists, and shone over the reddened glory of the autumn woods, and the gleaming waters of the Oise.

To Corinna those hours were leaden-footed—steeped in ever-increasing dread. The child's wails no longer pierced her heart, for exhaustion had stilled them. The little face grew hourly more pinched

and drawn, and bore that strange unlikeness to the face she knew, which makes a child's illness at once so pathetic and heart-breaking a thing.

Brandon came in again and again. He brought her nourishment, and he insisted on her taking it. He had the great deep-cushioned chair brought upstairs from the *salon*, and placed it close to the child's bedside, and seated her in it, so that she might keep her watch, and yet rest. Everything that thought and tenderness could do to alleviate her sufferings, he did; though the memory only came back to her in that dull after-time when the sharpness of suffering had passed. Now she scarcely heeded it.

It wrung his heart to see her agony. But he was helpless to comfort her.

"He is all I have," she moaned, look-

ing up dry-eyed, self-restrained, for fear of disturbing what she deemed sleep. Alas! it was only the lethargy of exhaustion! "He has been such a comfort to me in these sorrowful years. No man can understand that—you all think mothers are so foolish. Dear God! If it were not for that folly, you would not hold our lives as surely as you do!"

She seemed to have forgotten Loris and his danger. She never spoke of that journey which Brandon had agreed to undertake without a day's delay. And he dared not remind her. Her whole life was bound up in this struggle. Thought—feeling—passion—grief—all were held in abeyance, waiting for the issue. And he—he waited too.

The doctor's second visit, to which she had looked forward as to the decree of a

deity, extinguished the last faint hope she held. Medical aid was powerless, yet to it she clung with that desperation and patience which mark the agonies of a heart in its death-throbs.

The old man's eyes grew dim as he looked at her. No science could avail here, he knew. Nothing could recall the fiat gone forth from that Supreme Power which governs human life.

"He will die before the dawn," he said to Brandon. "I can do nothing more. I fear she will require my aid next. Poor young thing!"

It seemed to Brandon that never again in his life could he live through such lengthened torture as that day and night brought in their train. He could only be a silent, helpless witness of such anguish as he had never dreamt it lay in a woman's

nature to bear. True, he had known very little of women. Nothing of mothers such as this mother. For that divine unselfishness which is the sole superiority of woman's nature over man's, is also the one attribute of perfect maternity ; the angelic aureole which crowns her in the sight of men, who wonder—but cannot understand.

Brandon could not understand. To him this child was the living evidence of her shame. As years went on, as he grew to manhood, what heritage could she give him—what name, what position, what future? But of such things she never seemed to think. He was her own—her all ; fruit of her body, born of her anguish, living memory of his father's sin, yet none the less her treasure, her pride, her solace, and she could not yield him up to Death.

"God sent him to me in my darkest hour," she cried again and again. "He will not take him from me now! He could not be so unmerciful!"

The dark night crept on apace. She had sent old Babette away. She would have dismissed Brandon too, but he would not go.

There is nothing so trying as a sick room to a man—a man active, and full of energy and health. That stillness and inaction—that patient watching—that whispered interchange of words—are a worse ordeal to him than any bodily peril, or fatigue, or exertion. But all this he bore patiently and without murmur. To be *her* friend was worth it all, he thought.

Towards dawn there came a change. He had expected it, and was prepared.

"He is very cold," she said suddenly

to Brandon. "I think the fever must have left him. Come, feel his hand; his pulse is——"

She stopped. The agonised look he had grown to dread, came into her eyes.

"It is so feeble," she murmured. "What a little hand it is—it is lost in yours. Was it only my—fancy—that it was cold?"

He dropped the hand and looked at her. "Oh, my dear—my dear," he cried, brokenly. "How can I tell you! Can you not guess?"

"Guess! What is there to guess?" She threw herself on the bed, her arms round the little shrunken figure. Such a quiet figure now.

Ah, God! do any of us know how terrible a child's quietude can be, when we rebuke the tireless feet and noisy voice

and restless motions, that are only prized in such an hour as this !

"He is only sleeping," she murmured at last. "And I will keep him warm. I am sure he is better—see, he does not moan any more, and the flush has died out of his face. My little one—my baby—God has given you back to me."

"Corinna !" cried Brandon, desperately.

But she did not seem to heed or hear.

"When he wakes he will know me again —perhaps he will kiss me as he used to do. Ah, how sweet a child's kisses are; and his laugh—you never heard him laugh, my friend—you do not know how beautiful it is—just like a chime of silver bells. And his little feet—oh, the music of their sound, pattering over the old oak floors, making all the joy of my desolate life."

"My dear," pleaded Brandon, bending over her; "can you not realise the truth? He will make music for the angels in Heaven! God has thought it best."

She sprang up. Those words seemed to let in the cruel light of day upon her darkened soul. Her loss came home to her like a stroke of doom. The bright, hungry eyes searched Brandon's pitying face, and read the truth at last.

"Is it—death?" she cried, in agony. "No! no! it can't be—it can't be!" Her yearning mouth pressed the unbreathing lips, her trembling arms clasped the little still figure. Then suddenly their hold relaxed; she laid the child down, and staggered to her feet.

"I cannot make him warm," she said, piteously. "Has God indeed taken him?"

"Yes," said Brandon. This knowledge of her woe pressed on her brain, pierced through the clouds of weariness and stupor, held her there dumb, powerless, with a dread she could not name.

Then suddenly she stretched out her hands to the vacant air. "Will He not take me too?" she cried, and weeping passionately, fell on Brandon's breast.

He bore her away, reverently, tenderly, as he might have borne a sister. Her grief made her sacred in his eyes.

He summoned Babette and bade her take her mistress to her room, and persuade her to lie down. She was utterly prostrate and utterly exhausted. She let them do as they would. It was all over. Hope—life—joy, or such poor semblance of joy as she had clutched at in the wreck of her brief happiness. All over.

Pain numbed her—deadened her faculties like an anodyne. She lay there in a sort of stupor. Now and then the slow, sorrowful tears of weakness flowed from her closed eyes. But she took no heed of anything, or any one. Sorrow had crushed her to the dust.

"Does God know best?" her heart was asking. "How can I think so—now!"

It was long, long after before she could tell herself—"I have one pure memory to worship. He died sinless."

CHAPTER II.

Athirst for sleep, not life.

HE shock and loss following her previous anxiety of mind utterly prostrated Corinna. For days and days she lay there, knowing nothing, heeding nothing, unconscious of the passage of time, dead to everything save the dull, heavy sense of misery oppressing heart and brain.

The house was hushed as a grave. The old servants were distracted with grief and terror. Brandon alone had strength to command, as well as to endure. He could

not have left her at such a time, though he was denied her presence, and could only roam aimlessly about the desolate old rooms and leafless gardens, with a heavy, hopeless weight upon his soul—a dread he dared not name, even to himself.

Day after day the doctor's report was the same.

"I think she does not care to live," he said once, and Brandon's heart grew faint and sick as he heard the words.

"May I not see her?" he asked in despair, and the old man at last consented.

"If you can rouse her—give her any hope, any incentive—you may save her life yet," he said, "but it is a case for mental, not physical treatment. Her brain seems almost paralysed."

The child lay in its week-old grave

when he again saw its mother. She had left her bed that day, and lay on a couch by the window.

She was as white as the pillows. Her face was drawn and lined with suffering; great shadows lay under her closed eyes. The drooping lashes looked black as night against the colourless cheeks on which they rested.

He stood by her, and looked on her changed face in a very agony of dread. His hand touched her white, transparent fingers. She opened her eyes and looked at him.

"I am glad to see you," she said, faintly. "Have I been ill long?"

"A week," he answered, his voice tremulous, despite the iron self-control which he had resolved to maintain.

"A week!"

Her eyes closed again. Her mouth quivered like that of a grieved child.

“Only a week? It seems a lifetime.”

Brandon seated himself beside her. “I want you to think of yourself now,” he said. “You have suffered greatly, but the hand of sorrow will not always lie upon your life. Try and believe that.”

Great, slow tears rolled down from under the closed lids.

“It is too soon to speak of comfort,” she said, brokenly. “Comfort is for those who forget. I—I have never found *that* easy.”

Brandon set his teeth firm in mental conflict.

When he longed to avenge her, he must befriend the traitor who had ruined her life—that beautiful, gifted, serious life, which had once seemed to him to shrine

the very perfection of womanhood. He had to fight against his own instincts—the very reverence and devotion in which he held her. He seemed only to hear a voice crying, "For her sake, save—him!"

"I am giving her more than my life," he thought to himself. "Would she care very much, even if she knew? Sometimes I think not. No man could share her heart's idolatry."

"Your life is not valueless," he continued, after a brief struggle for mastery over himself, "and it has still an object. Have you forgotten—Loris?"

Her eyes opened. A sudden flush of colour stained her white cheeks.

"Ah, Heaven!" she cried, "my grief has made me selfish. You are right. I

had forgotten. But Loris—he can never be anything to me again . . . and my child God has taken my child. Men’s laws part me from my husband. Ah, my friend, is not my life desolate?”

“It can hold one hope,” he said, and hated himself for saying it, “if you save Loris—is not that worth living for? You told me his existence made up the sum of yours.”

She covered her face with her thin, white hands.

“Oh, Loris, Loris!” she moaned. “He could comfort me. The child was his also. Not to him what it was to me—that could never be—but still ours—a link to hold our lives together in this world and the next.”

“And have you forgotten that Loris

is in danger—that he, too, suffers?" urged Brandon, gently. Once aroused from apathy, he determined to apply fresh incentives for the poor stricken soul to assert itself. "I want you to think of him. I want you to regain your health and strength ere I go on my quest. I want you to be brave, as I know you can be. Will you try?"

She listened to his words; she gave a long, shuddering sigh; her head fell back on the pillows.

"I would rather die than live," she said; "still, for his sake——"

That was Brandon's reward.

"She is better," said the doctor that night. "I think she will do now. What magic did you use?"

Brandon smiled bitterly. He made no answer, only went out into the bleak, dark night, and paced the cheerless, neglected terrace to and fro. All the manhood and knighthood of his nature rebelled against the man whom he had vowed to serve. Sometimes he thought that if he met him face to face he would kill him like a dog. But her love held him sacred. He could only smite him through that faithful heart. Sooner than deal her one stroke of suffering, he knew he would fling his life, like water, at her feet.

The feeble hope he had whispered took root in her heart. Day after day added strength to her frame, and with each day he knew the hour of separation drew nearer. All that she could tell him of

Fedoroff's life in these two years, she told him from his letters. Some she gave into his keeping. "If the Czar could read these," she said, proudly, "he would see he was no conspirator. On the contrary, it was he who had foes."

"Perhaps this is a plot of the Nihilists," suggested Brandon. "The Government may have had nothing to do with it."

She shook her head despairingly. "I cannot tell."

"I will leave in two days from this," he said. "But you must promise me you will try and get strong. You must not give way to these fits of despair."

That dim, shadowy smile crossed her lips, which was all they had long known of mirth. "You are so clever and so good," she said, gently. "But learn this. A man can console a woman for most

things if he love her—but not if she be a mother who mourns her child.”

In two days, as he had said, he left her, and the gloom and desolation of a grave seemed to close upon her life.

Sometimes her grief swept down upon her with resistless force. The vanished music of faltering steps, the coo of greeting, the thousand wiles and ways that make up the eloquence of child-life—all these she missed and hungered for as only a widowed mother-heart can hunger. For she had no one now—no one !

She missed Brandon intensely. His strong sense, his patient thought, his unselfish devotion, unnoticed when he was beside her, came back to her now with all the faithfulness of memory.

It seemed to her that she must have

appeared cold and ungrateful often, that grief had made her selfish, and love had made her blind; but she knew also that all her inner life had been poisoned at its source. Out of those bitter channels could flow no pure, or gracious feelings more.

The stillness and inertness of her life made it one of constant retrospection. Across those terrible memories would sometimes fall the chill of her present dread. Once again the paralysis of sorrow struck to the root of her mental powers, and the art that might have been her solace, only mocked her as its own avenger.

"You chose Loris," it seemed to say. "Oh, fool—fool—what does love ever do to a woman save poison all her peace? Can it give you what I gave? Can it

fill your soul with ecstasy, and crown your head with laurels, and gain you all men's praise, and all the world's memory? Yet all these I gave, and you threw them aside for a dream that has spoilt your life."

"It is quite true," she would cry to her heart, "quite true; but Loris was worth it all."

Yet Loris had only written his name in fire across her stainless soul, and left it there to burn on, on, unquenchably till death should strike it out, or heaven relight it.

The world talks much of love, but knows little of it. For a great love means so rarely a happy fate, and its surest abiding place is in some woman's breaking heart, or some man's hopeless one.

It has been said that genius is con-

solation. Not in any hour of sorrow—not to any betrayed soul—not to the emptiness of a desolate heart—not to a woman's empty arms.

What can art hold that does not look like mockery beside a child's dying bed—before a lost or faithless love? Aye, what indeed, oh suffering ones of earth, whose brows are pierced with thorns beneath your laurel crowns, whose genius faints and fails in the death-throes of despair!

A great sorrow may teach great truths; may ennoble, elevate, subdue. But, oh, how much it takes away! How its footsteps sear and burn the fair green garden of the soul!

On one of those desolate days a letter came to Corinna from Madame Nina.

"Dearest one," it said, "I have seen

our English chevalier. He tells me you are ill and in great trouble. May I come to you? I won't bring Raoul this time."

Corinna's first impulse had been to say, "No," but on after consideration she changed her resolve.

Nina was kind-hearted, if frivolous and impulsive. And the emptiness and isolation of her life now were hard to bear. So she wrote one word, "Come!" and Madame Nina packed her trunks and left her beloved Paris; gave a few parting admonitions to the obedient Raoul, and—came.

CHAPTER III.

To suffer woes which hope thinks infinite,
To forgive wrongs, darker than death or night.

IT seemed always winter in that dreary northern land where Loris Fedoroff had chosen to expiate his crime by daily penance.

The great, gloomy fortress, that would have been a château in France, a castle in England, grew more hateful to him every day. It lay amidst a few scattered villages, and was surrounded by great plains of grain and grass, and dim forests of pines. There was no beauty for the

eye to see. It was intensely melancholy—it held that stagnation and inertness which is worse than any loneliness—it seemed like a tomb that shuts out life, and holds in its desolate vaults a hopelessness which makes death a word of terror.

To a man like Loris Fedoroff the place was one of utter horror. All his artistic fancies, his refined tastes, his feelings and sensibilities were outraged continually. The peasantry were sullen and disaffected. Unknown to their lord, the Propagandists had been working seriously and skilfully on their discontent. Everything he did was viewed with distaste and suspicion. All his overtures towards friendliness or a better understanding met with scant courtesy. He had tried to redress grievances, to make them accept benefits, or amelioration, in that bitter, dreary slavery

which was all they knew of life, and the result was that he brought down suspicion on his own head, and made enemies in the ever-watchful Government, as well as among those secret spies whose duty it was to work upon disaffection for their own purposes.

Neither party understood him, for to neither did he seem to belong. He did not appeal to that strange compound of mysticism and bigotry and superstition which symbolises priesthood. He was generous; he was merciful. He treated his people as reasonable creatures, not as brute beasts, and yet they only muttered, and held aloof, and asked themselves, "Why?"

Free! Of course they were free; they knew that. Had not the Holy Czar emancipated twenty-two millions of subjects,

and had not the news been carried from end to end of his vast territories? But yet they failed to see any advantage brought by that pardon.

The yoke of centuries could not be lifted from crushed minds and feeble brains in a day. When their lord talked to them of education, and wanted to found schools for the children, and apprentice the youths to trade, they stared at him and thought him mad. Such virtues as order and cleanliness were unknown. Their huts were comfortless, that was true enough, but they had never known anything better. Why should they trouble themselves to alter them?

What with their lord on the one hand, and these strange, secret people on the other, who told them they held it in their power to change the very dynasty

of their country, to make it free, noble, dignified, as other countries were, they grew bewildered. The Emperor was their father. Why should they call him an autocrat and a tyrant? That their Government was the by-word of Europe mattered nothing to them. Why should it?

For generations back their fathers had lived as they lived—a sordid, hard-working, unpicturesque life, with the unfailing fare of black bread, and *quass*, and cabbage; their only pleasure a saint's day *fête*, or a visit to a neighbouring fair. Among such surroundings, and with such traditions, where could they gather sentiment or inspiration; the zeal of patriots, or the courage of freedom?

Day by day, as Loris went among them, as he took long, lonely rides over those sandy leagues, or through the dreary

pine woods, the hopelessness of effort among such a people came home to him afresh.

It was no light task he had set himself. It was indeed a martyrdom, from which his soul shrank in passionate rebellion, and yet he resolved to go through with it to the bitter end.

As time went on, little by little, he won his way through that barrier of servility which was to him so abject and disgusting. He hated to see the people crouch at his feet like whipped hounds; he hated all those slavish professions of homage which placed him on a throne of superiority, and abased them as creatures of another order. He wanted to see them respectful yet dignified, obedient yet reasonable and reasoning. In a word, he wanted *men*, not slaves, around him,

and these things he could not make them understand.

Yet they cared for him, and admired him in a way. Personal beauty is a sorcery that appeals even to the lowest human intelligence, and when he rode out among them on his black Russian horse, or drove his sledge through the dreary villages, all eyes turned admiringly to that fair-skinned face that carried so grave and kind a greeting, and their lord's smile seemed as sunshine to many a frozen life.

They were glad, too, to have him among them. His stewards had been cruel and exacting, but he never was; and it seemed in some way a comfort to look up at that barred and dreary building, with its great gates and narrow

windows, and say one to another, "Our lord is among us."

There were times when Loris rebelled against this self-wrought penance — times when heart and senses cried for food, and all the pleasures, and luxuries, and loveliness of the life he had denied himself, spread themselves before his eyes in tempting and alluring display.

Immured in this desert, he thought of those bygone days when every hour had been full of pleasure and delight. Shut up in self-sought solitude, he would listen to the wails of the wind, the howl of the wolves, the fury of storm blasts and snow, until it seemed to him that he would go mad.

The days were dreary, the nights more hideous still. The one rare gleam

of consolation that came to him from time to time was a letter from Corinna. That strengthened him—that renewed his courage—that brought before him the sin that had cursed two lives, and once more hurled him back into the agonies of repentance and expiation, which he had told himself were his just due.

What had he to do now with life's pleasures and enjoyments? Above him, chained and manacled like a savage beast, lay the fruits of his youth's first folly. Apart from him, in nun-like seclusion, lived the noble, beautiful life he had wrecked—the woman wronged beyond all wrongs of womanhood, who yet had smiled with tenderest pity on her wrongdoer's face, and murmured, "I forgive."

When he thought of her as he had seen her last, he cursed himself in very

hatred and abhorrence. The patience of her life, the greatness of her pardon, seemed to him as things divine. She had brought out all that was in him of good, and purified the evil. With every month of suffering, and parting, and loneliness, his love grew and grew, yet purified itself from the dross of earthly passion, and set her far above his reach or worth—an ideal of perfect womanhood.

Then he grew humble, as indeed all men of any worth must grow before the sublimity and unselfishness of a woman's love, and he knew that if his penance lasted all his life, it yet could not expiate the wrong done to her.

So the seasons went and came—the long, bleak winter, the brief spring and summer days that changed so quickly back to winter once again.

The earth was like a snow shroud. The ice-bound blood flowed sluggishly through the veins of even the hardy peasants, and the gray sky brooded sullen and monotonous over the dreary plains, and the forests where the wolves howled in savage hunger.

Loris had but one companion with whom he could associate on anything like equal terms. This was Michael Varishkin, the cousin of the priest, Ivan Pisaroff. He, like Ivan, had been born and reared in seclusion and ignorance. But he had not Ivan's fierce passions and dogged obstinacy. Neither had he listened to, or made friends with those treacherous teachers, whose doctrines were being disseminated everywhere.

A Russian priest is often no whit better off than a peasant, but the Countess

Fedoroff had been fond of Ivan Pisaroff, and had had him much at Garishka, and had given him instruction, and placed the great classic library, that had been her husband's pride, at his service. At her death, too, she had left him money—a sum that looked like incalculable riches, but which he had placed in the hands of those cunning foes who had poisoned his life of its calm content, and worked upon that one jealous, savage passion which had its root in rivalry and disappointed love. Through these powerful agents he learnt of Loris Fedoroff. His life was watched, menaced, endangered a score of times; yet spared by force of accident or mislaid plans.

Once entrapped into that mysterious order, Ivan Pisaroff knew liberty or peace no more. Of the real nature of the society he

was almost entirely ignorant. The motives and machinery were kept at work in hidden corners, and entrenched behind a phalanx of grievances, oppressions, injustice, that only called for redress in one word, "Abolition of Tyranny." He was called upon to use his influence, sparingly, cautiously, to be prudent and secret, and trust no one, even in the brotherhood whose membership he owned.

He scarcely knew how far he had gone before he found himself hopelessly meshed. To what lengths he might have been drawn, into what plots initiated, it would be hard to say. Death cut short the knot of his entanglement—the folly of his belief in the ultimate recovery of the poor maniac whose memory he adored—and Loris Fedoroff came on this scene of hidden rebellion and discontent.

Utterly ignorant of the secret forces undermining that strength of feudal attachment so characteristic of the Russian serf, Loris, as has been stated, went to work in his own way. A new priest had been appointed—a man very different to the dreamy, enthusiastic Ivan.

The Society had met with a check. They had never dreamt that the lawful lord of the soil would put in his presence for any length of time, still less that he would set himself to abolish the grievances they had fostered as weapons of discontent. So they rested on their weapons and waited.

Some of the most venturesome proposed drawing him into their net; to try to convert him, at least, into one of those apparently harmless “*Ukrivateli*” who share the revolutionary ideas of the

Nihilists, yet take no active part in the service. He was a puzzle to them, and they acknowledged it. He had been a marked man on their lists for years; he was hated and abhorred for the cruelties and tyrannies practised in his name. His death would have benefited the cause, for the next heir belonged to a branch of the Fedoroffs, who were its warm supporters, who were all "*Ukrivateli*," or partisans, though living unsuspected in the very centre of Imperialism.

Yet here he was now in the very midst of danger, living a life of martyrdom for no apparent reason. Shut up in that monastic fortress where dwelt the poor mad creature, whom the people thought a saint. He appeared to suspect no harm; to fear no treachery. He went about unguarded; often, indeed, unarmed, though

there were other foes at hand than the famished wolves of the forests, and greater perils at his side than the fierce snowstorms and pathless woods.

They began soon to fear his influence over the people. It was natural they should listen to their lord when he condescended to speak; more natural still that they should accept favours and benefits from him, rather than from strangers who told them they were oppressed and wronged.

Besides, the priest was a staunch friend to the Count, and never wearied of speaking his praises in their ears.

The second summer of Loris' voluntary exile came round. The brief, bright summer that made men once again in love with life. At the magic whisper of Nature, the snow shroud fell off the frozen

earth. Tender shoots gave beauty to the land, and buds and blossoms covered the fields and woods. The sun rent asunder that dull, gray mantle which for long was all they had known of sky, and poured out his hot and radiant rays in glad and life-giving warmth.

It was a saint's day at Garishka, and the whole population had turned out *en masse*. The sullen faces cleared; the children played; the women smiled and chatted. They were on their way to the service held in their lord's church of St. Vladimir, and at every step they revelled in the draughts of sunshine, the fragrant breezes, the scents of budding trees and fresh-turned earth.

No work that day. They were free to do what they pleased—to wander where

they would—to unite all their adverse elements into one general feeling of friendship and rejoicing.

True, there was a cloud upon their enjoyment. A rumour of strange, stern-faced men sent thither to watch and report. An ominous whisper breathing out the one word that makes lord or peasant alike a coward. The word was "Siberia."

But they shook it off in the glorious sunshine. Parents, children, betrothed lovers, friends, old men and young, mingled together in that stream, bound alike for the great service of the day.

The crowd grew and increased, added to by all the villages round, for there was no church nearer than Garishka.

They were within sight of the gates, when suddenly a cry so startling, so un-

earthly, so terrible that it chilled their veins with fear, broke out, and rang through the air.

An instant, and the entrance way was flung open, and flying towards them—her mouth foaming—her hair streaming in the wind—her clothes rent and disordered—came a woman.

The superstition inherent in the Russian nature held the crowd spell-bound. Then a cry broke forth—"It is the Saint—it is the Holy Nadia! She is coming to bless us!"

They threw themselves on their knees. They parted right and left, lowering their heads to the ground. They heard their lord's voice thunder out, "Stop that woman, for God's sake!" But they paid no heed.

She was a Saint. Father Ivan had told them so long ago. Doubtless she would

work some miracle, or do some wondrous deed.

What she did was to fly through their ranks like one possessed, uttering those hoarse and terrible cries, the like of which their ears had never heard, and after her, in headlong pursuit, came Loris Fedoroff and two other men.

Just as they were gaining on her, a man stepped out of the ranks of peasantry and caught her by her dress—if, indeed, the rags she wore could be called that. She flew at him like a tigress. There was a flash—a scream, and then—silence.

As Loris reached the spot, a huddled, bleeding mass lay stretched at his feet. He seized the man by the throat, and shook him like a rat.

"You coward!" he hissed. "How

dare you use a weapon on my territory, and on a woman too!"

His face was white as death. He hurled the man some dozen paces off, and threw himself beside the still and bleeding figure.

She was quite dead—shot through the heart. Loris rose and turned to the startled crowd.

"Bear her within," he said, briefly, "and bind him," pointing to the fallen man, "and bring him also. He shall answer for this."

The man raised himself and shook the dust off his clothes, then lifted his hand and beckoned.

Some six or seven men, all strangers to Loris, advanced at the signal.

"Arrest that man," came the order—

clear, fierce, yet authoritative, as only an official mandate can be.

The men advanced. Loris retreated a step in bewilderment.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked, sternly. "Who are you?"

"I am Michael Botolsk, of the Third Section of the Russian Police. I arrest you in the name of the Emperor."

"On what charge?"

"You are suspected of dealings with the 'Secret Society,' who have had agents here."

Loris laughed aloud.

"I—a Nihilist! In the name of all that's holy, take me to your Emperor. He knows me better than you seem to do."

The men closed round him. The people

rose from their knees, pale, trembling—weeping. They saw the great gates part—open—close.

The dull, heavy sound of the iron bolts struck them like a knell of doom.

Silently they turned and moved away, gazing awestruck into each other's faces, touching affrightedly each other's hands.

"We shall never see our lord again," the women sobbed.

And they never did.

CHAPTER IV.

A MARTYR'S MEMORY.

IN the dead of night the slumbering peasants were awakened by the dull, heavy tread of horses. They shuddered and looked in each other's faces, murmuring that one word which for them held the bitterness of a living death.

The meaning of many things that had puzzled them became suddenly clear. These mysterious men and women who had been living amongst them, working with them, sapping the very foundation

of their loyalty, were really members of that dread organisation whose name was a by-word of terror. But what they could not understand, and what they dared not ask, was how their lord had become implicated in their plots.

With the morning they knew he had been carried away from Garishka. The great, gloomy fortress frowned down upon them and froze them with terror as they gazed. Fear paralysed them. They thought that at any moment the same impassive tyranny might seize upon themselves and condemn them to a like fate. In almost every family some members had been tampered with. Sworn to secrecy and submission, they might at any moment be called upon to proclaim their adherence, or place themselves as instruments in the hands of a dread and

unknown power which had thrown its shadow over the peace and content of their lives.

Soon a warning reached them that they were watched, that they were to be cautious, even in their own households, and they crept about like beaten hounds, afraid to speak, afraid to question, helpless as children, and as much in need of guidance.

For the present all proceedings had to be abandoned. The innocent victim of Imperial power had passed from out their lives. Cowed and intimidated, they went about their daily duties, labouring, toiling as of old, afraid to breathe a word of what smouldered in their hearts.

From the day of Loris Fedoroff's arrest, not a word reached them of his fate. Garishka had been turned into an

official residence for a detachment of police and Cossacks. The hand of tyranny pressed hard upon them. Persecution, injustice, oppression, these were again the daily elements of their lives.

Surprise had paralysed resistance. They were not yet ripe for open rebellion, and before their eyes was ever that tradition, handed down from one generation to another, of the bands of martyrs bound Siberia-ward, never again to see their homes or friends, condemned to an exile more terrible than tongue could tell.

So the great work was held in temporary abeyance, and sullen helplessness fettered the suffering people in chains of inertia. Time went on. A silence as of death had fallen between them and that fair-faced lord whose kindly smile and gracious words had now the added charm

of a martyr's memory. They knew it was for their sake he suffered. Because of them suspicion had fallen upon him.

No deed of kindness or act of generosity had ever so endeared him to their memories, as had this sudden misfortune. They went through the toil and labour that for centuries had been their forefathers' lot, and now was theirs. They seemed beaten, submissive as ever, but the spark kindled in their hearts needed now but a word to fan it into flame, and the work begun out of enmity to their lord would henceforth find in his name its surest incentive; in the avenging of his fate, its watchword of defiance!

But on the surface life was still the same. The sheep, the field, the plough, the journeys to the fair, the quality of

the *vodki* or *kvass*, the excitement of a pedlar's visit, a saint's day festival, these alone seemed to occupy the minds of the passive, melancholy, apathetic creatures, whom the iron hand of the law held crushed in its grasp.

To them, in the retirement of hut and cabin, came one day a strange rumour.

Some one, a foreigner, an Angliski, had come to Garishka. He had gone to their lord's gates, and demanded admission. Who was he? No one knew. Some said a messenger from the Holy Father himself, the great lord and sovereign ruler, whose clemency had forbidden further punishment for a crime never committed. Be that as it may, he was there now, and the wildest hopes and suggestions ran riot in their minds. Since their

master was not forgotten, might he not be again restored to them ?

The stranger was no other than Gilbert Brandon.

He had come here before setting any of that cumbrous Government machinery in motion, because he wished to get at the root of the matter. He had come, to find Garishka a sort of public barracks, and only with the greatest difficulty did he obtain admission. Provided with letters from the English Ambassador at St. Petersburg, he, with proverbial British coolness, set to work to fathom the cause of Loris Fedoroff's banishment.

From Michael Varishkin he heard one story, from the Chief of Police another ; but he saw clearly enough how the mistake must have arisen. How Loris in his unconsciousness had been really working

into the hands of the society; how, suspected on both sides, he had fallen a victim to the strongest power; the result—well, *that* remained to be seen.

In those letters to Corinna lay the only proof of his innocence—not very strong or sure proof, perhaps, but all that it was possible to gain.

Even the surly official had been obliged to confess no compromising papers—no condemnatory evidence against the exiled man had been forthcoming, but Nihilism had been rife in the province. Loris had made himself conspicuous, and—"it was just as well to make an example." Sound reasoning this, and all-sufficient for condemning an innocent man to the horrors of Siberian exile.

Brandon listened with fiery indignation—all the fiercer because prudence

bade him suppress it. Had he not come armed with so powerful an authority, his own liberty might have been endangered. Sympathy with a "suspect" is in itself a crime, and Russian prisons are strong, and have kept many secrets in their time.

Brandon spent a few days in that bleak and lonely prison-house gaining what information he could, trying to comfort the inconsolable Michael, and the poor old priest, who adored his wronged and innocent lord.

"A fine government truly that cannot tell friends from foes," Michael would mutter wrathfully to his new friend, and the old man would shake his head and cry brokenly — "My poor young lord, my noble master; it is all some dreadful mistake. He never spoke of a Nihilist

but in scorn and hatred, nor ever troubled his head about a plot or scheme of theirs; that I'd swear before even Alexander, the son of Nicholas, himself."

"He was so good to us," cried the people, and they told of debts forgiven, and houses rebuilt, and food and wine sent to them in winter famine, or hours of sickness; of kindly counsels, and cheerful hopes, that had fallen like sunshine across the dark bleak drudgery of their lives.

All these things came back to them now, swelling the debt of their gratitude and love, and all this evidence Brandon gathered by Michael's interpretation and stored up to be used in the service of the man whom he had considered as his life-long foe.

It was Michael, too, who had told him

of the mad Nadia's fate, though he had no suspicion of the relation in which she had stood to his exiled lord.

That news came home to Brandon with a mingled sense of abhorrence and relief. At least it lifted the shame from Loris Fedoroff's life ; it would give him the power to restore to Corinna the honour he had robbed her of.

If he worked to procure Loris's freedom there would be a chance of happiness yet for the woman he so hopelessly worshipped, and that thought nerved him to go through with his hard and hated task.

The more he saw of Russian life, the more abhorrent it seemed to him. He no longer wondered at Fedoroff's oft-expressed dislike and long avoidance of the country. He understood, too, in some measure how great a change must have

been wrought in the man, since he had voluntarily exiled himself here, and worked and laboured and suffered throughout these dreary years, among a people he disliked, amidst surroundings so distasteful.

He had won his reward in the love and faithful memory of his suffering dependants. In their eyes he was henceforth a saint, whose memory would be in their hearts, and the hearts of their children, from that day forward. All this Brandon wrote to Corinna, but he kept silence as to Nadia's tragic end.

The man who caused it had personally related the incident to Brandon.

"I had no wish to be strangled, and she would have killed me," he said, coolly. "I thought my life was the most valuable of the two, so I shot her.

Batyushka! I have the marks of her claws to this day!"

"And a good thing too," the Englishman muttered, below his breath.

Then, armed with all the information he could collect, he again summoned his guide, and turned his back on the sullen fortress and barren plains of the Fedoroff dominions.

CHAPTER V.

THE PREY OF THE GODS.

MADAME NINA was horrified at the change in Corinna. For days she could never look at her without tears welling slowly and painfully to her bright eyes, and all her spirits seemed to forsake her in the presence of a woe she could but dimly comprehend.

It seemed to her better that the child should have died. In the future Corinna would not have to share her secret, or breathe its dishonour to her son. But

nothing could make her look on it in that light, and the little Countess dared not utter such a heresy.

Very gently and gradually she strove to rouse her from that terrible apathy of grief.

At one time she tried to persuade her to come to Paris and take up her abode in the bright little hotel which Raoul had beautified and enriched for his treasure. Change and life would do her good, she urged. But Corinna shuddered at the thought. Nothing would induce her to leave the château.

“At some future time,” she said, “when I am stronger, when my mind is at rest, I will come.”

“And do you never mean to write again? Do you know you are sacrificing your reputation?” continued Madame

Nina. "Every one, all the journals, all the *littérateurs* are grumbling at your silence. They say you promised too well at first. There was bound to be reaction, if not failure."

Corinna's beautiful, pale face glowed with sudden anger. "Do they say that?" she exclaimed. "Ah, we shall see if they are right."

Madame Nina was delighted. She followed up her advantage on every possible occasion. She took long walks with Corinna, though she hated exercise; she read, talked, lectured, scolded, until that frozen apathy began to melt at her insistent endeavours, and, in very desperation, Corinna seized her pen and threw herself once more heart and soul into work.

That novel begun in Rome was still unfinished. The hero—pictured and

drawn from her own ardent fountain of love, and ennobled with all the glories of her imagination, still awaited completion. No need now to cull from fancy the incidents and tragedies which might surround his fate. Experience had brought them to her as guerdon of her own sacrifice. She had but to stoop, and gather, and breathe life, and shape, and passion into them, and lo, before her would stand such a creation as never had her genius imagined, or her art produced.

The thought grew and grew until it dominated her whole mind, and set the currents of thought to its mastering force, and so drew her on and out of herself until she recognised again what had once been the exclusive passion of her life.

A passion yet more powerful and tyrannical had usurped it for a time—

nature had gathered to itself the supremacy and devotion which is the crown of all woman's love ; but the old instinct was not dead, though for long it had been silent, and Fame whispered of past triumphs and pointed on to greater victories, and murmured, "I could console you, if you would. Do not let your whole life perish for a dream."

She came to Madame Nina one day, her face flushed, her eyes radiant. "Dear Nina, you have been so good and so unselfish, but it is time you went to your own home. Your husband needs you, I am sure, and I have been selfish to keep you so long. And now—now I am going to throw off this lethargy ; I am going to take your counsels. The old fire has broken up my frozen life. I feel I *must* work for work's sake. It

is in me. I cannot help it. I thought pain and sorrow had burnt out all that other power, but they have not. I feel it. The world will praise me, and he will be proud of me still."

She had almost forgotten Siberia.

A few days more, and the old dreams were in her eyes, and the old light on her face, and all the hours were busy and the days no longer long.

Brandon would save Loris, of that she felt assured. She had the most implicit faith in his strength and power, and by the time he was free, and honoured, and forgiven, her name would be on all men's tongues, and he would read this—her work—and say, "Love has taught her the greatest truth of life."

This hope glorified all she did.

Formerly she had been but a muse. Now she was muse and woman both. The combination should frame so grand an effort of genius that all the world would wonder and adore.

She felt the power glowing and gathering force within her veins, as the young trees feel the sap that thrills them into glorious leafage. She felt it in its beautiful, electric, spontaneous force that is of all things the most delicious and desirable of artistic gifts. She felt it and rejoiced, and all her frozen life was broken up, and her friend, watching, and weeping glad and wondering tears, murmured, "She is saved."

Madame Nina went back to Paris, while Brandon made that slow, and tortuous, and difficult journey back to Petersburg to

aid the man whom of all men he hated most.

Once there the real difficulties of his mission began.

Russian officialism is proverbially slow, and proverbially obstinate. The administrators of justice see little difference in grades of criminality. A young noble "suspect" is as guilty to all intents and purposes as the murderer, or thief, with whom he may be bracketed in exile, and it is only too common a fact that innocent offenders are condemned to all the horrors of capital punishment in company with criminals whose foreheads bear the disgraceful brand "V.O.R." (felon).

Many do not even know of what they are accused. The police make a sudden raid upon their dwellings, seize books and papers, and carry their possessors off to

prison, and force them in a week or two to exile.

Brandon for long could ascertain nothing of the fate of Loris Fedoroff. It seemed shrouded in impenetrable mystery. The Emperor was absent. The high officials were politely vague, and all the interest and importance he could bring to assist him, served but to mystify the matter still more.

Fedoroff had been unpopular, and to that fact was added the imprudence of his late conduct with regard to his people. If he had been suspected without cause, or condemned too hastily, so much the more reason for throwing no light on the subject.

Those who are the administrators of the law never like to admit a mistake.

As time passed on Brandon grew well-nigh desperate. The rigours of a Russian

winter tried both his health and his patience. The outside world lay fast bound in iron frost and shrouds of snow, few people were seen abroad, and a vast silence seemed to hold the great city in a grasp of inanition. Sleighs glided noiselessly over the hard frozen ground, and figures wrapped to the eyes in furs flitted swiftly along amidst the feathery flakes of constant falling snow. The intense cold seemed to chill all life and animation.

Brandon thought of Loris' possible fate, and shuddered. There was no chance at present of helping him, even of rousing any interest in headquarters. He could only wait.

He wrote to Corinna cheerfully and hopefully. He had learnt and read all that was possible respecting Siberia, and told her that it was more than probable Loris

had not been sentenced to the mines, but had been banished to Irkoutsk, the capital of Eastern Siberia. The town was a beautiful and important one, and he would be comparatively well off, if sentenced there, and enjoy a certain amount of liberty which might speedily terminate in entire freedom.

This letter cheered Corinna inexpressibly, and gave her courage and strength to pursue her literary labours. Brandon had not yet mentioned the tragic death of Nadia. He deemed it best to preserve silence on that point, until assured of the fate of Fedoroff. What use to disturb Corinna's peace now? Better to let her deem their lives as utterly severed as ever, until some sure basis of hope had been secured.

Meanwhile those bitter winter months

were as one long martyrdom. The whole land lay under the shadow of impending disaster—distracted with internal grievances, and traitorous friends, and relentless foes.

Nihilism stalked darkly along, undisturbed by obstacles—by danger—exile—death. Crushed in one place to rise in another. A hydra-headed monster, deadly and unscrupulous, that showed itself at palace banquets—in royal ante-chambers—in every branch and section of official and political life, as well as in the humbler dwellings of artisans, and traders, and peasants. At such a time the very fact of inquiring about, or interesting oneself in a “suspected” person was to call forth distrust—coldness—avoidance.

There were times when Brandon resolved to set forth himself as soon as

the cold broke up and inquire at Tioumen as to the real destination of the unfortunate man. He knew that from there he had received his sentence.

As he sat alone one night in the warm, luxurious room of his hotel, one of the attendants brought him a letter, saying a messenger had left it. On opening it Brandon read these mysterious words:

"For a service rendered to the dead, the living shall reward you. Loris Fedoroff is not of Us, but for the sake of Another Martyr he shall be rescued. Ere four months have passed you shall see him in Paris—at the house where you left a certain packet in the autumn of last year. We but fulfil a mission from the grave. *Do not remain in Petersburg.*"

This rhodomontade at first amused the cool common sense, and unromantic

temperament of the Englishman. Yet on second thoughts he considered it might be seriously meant. That mysterious packet delivered into his hands by Paul Ramon had evidently found its way to its destination, and now seemed about to serve him in a pressing emergency. But why should he leave Petersburg?

Was it a hoax—an excuse to get rid of him? He sat there for long, and pondered over the strange document.

He was only too thankful for an excuse to leave Russia, for the inclemency of the climate had tried his health sorely, and he had long ere this learnt the futility of expecting assistance from bureaucratic, or official circles. “Once an exile always an exile,” seemed the motto there.

As far as he could ascertain, Fedoroff was at Irkoutsk, in what capacity he was

ignorant. But Irkoutsk is many thousands of *versts* from St. Petersburg, and to travel thither until the spring was simply impossible—and in four months Loris was to be in Paris—so said his unknown friends.

After long deliberation he resolved to take their advice and depart. He could do no good by remaining, and was only bringing down suspicion and dislike on himself and his colleagues in high quarters.

On the morrow his determination was taken.

A fortnight later he was in Paris, and in Paris people talked of nothing else but the new book "*Istorel*," by the popular author Corinna.

He was astonished. He had not heard of her resolve, and did not know how

she had been spending those anxious, weary months. He had left her crushed by sorrow — a broken-hearted, despairing woman. He came back to find that she had shaken off grief's weary trammels, and again let her rich gifts assert themselves, and win her fame. He bought a copy of the book, and took it to his hotel and read it — read it with an interest, an insight, a tender sympathy, a breathless delight, such as no mere outsider could have had.

He read it, and he saw there the history of that beautiful life—its love, its trust, its sorrow, its despair; but he read also something better and nobler than any book of hers had yet displayed. Something indefinable that yet had power to touch a chord of sympathy in every human heart, and wake both answer and belief. Some-

thing that would make women's eyes dim and men's hearts pitiful, and waken shame even in the hardened and the shameless.

He knew then who had been her teacher and what the lesson had cost, and he threw the book aside with a stifled sob, knowing the anguish and the suffering of the writer's life.

He thought of her own words that autumn night: “See what love has done for me !”

CHAPTER VI.

MADAME NINA AT HOME.

MADAME NINA was “receiving.” Her pretty *bijou* house was open to a select few, but such a “few” as she delighted to gather. A Russian *attaché*, a Polish exile, an English ambassador on his way to Turkey, a sprinkling of *literati*, one or two Americans, the English peer and poet—Sir Wilfred Carew, a few lovely Frenchwomen of high rank, and a Russian countess who was suspected of a leaning towards Nihilism.

She had invited these people because Corinna was staying with her, and she had decided in her usual impetuous fashion that Corinna wanted cheering, rousing—society, in fact; and she had coaxed, and scolded, and teased her into appearing, greatly against her will.

The two women presented even a greater contrast than usual. Madame Nina had attired herself in a costume of deep red embossed velvet; and Corinna—having for once thrown aside her mourning—selected a creamy, clinging silk, whose sweeping folds showed every line of her superb figure, and wore her beautiful dusky hair twisted high up on her head. She looked like a Greek statue come to life, and men's eyes followed her admiringly wherever she moved.

She was very quiet; she listened, but seldom spoke, and received the many compliments on her last book with a cold and negligent grace that made the speakers feel their praises almost an intrusion.

Only once was she roused to any appearance of interest, and that was when the Russian Countess held forth on political matters, and the bugbear of Nihilism was openly discussed.

The Countess was very pretty, very witty, and very imprudent, so much so in fact that her stay in Paris was really a politely enforced exile from St. Petersburg. Perhaps this added a little bitterness to her speech, and made her a trifle imprudent in her objurgations against despots, and the evils of a too arbitrary Government. But all she said was listened

to with attention, and Corinna seemed absolutely to hang on her words.

"Is it possible for exiles to escape sometimes?" she asked at last. "And is all we hear and read of Siberia really true?"

"The accounts are terribly exaggerated," said the Countess. "For two reasons: one that such accounts are written from vague information, often from hearsay, and largely added to by imagination; the other, the vast distance and the impracticability of getting information from a reliable source. As for escaping, that is difficult indeed, though it has been done. Again, there are rare cases where a sentence has been repealed, either because it was discovered to be erroneous, or through vast interest, or a freak of

imperial clemency. As for those dreadful stories of the mines and the sufferings of the exiles, they have been largely contradicted of late years. Still, things are bad enough, no doubt, but it is hard to get at the truth of them."

"I have been expecting a friend here to-night who has given us some information on the subject," said Madame Nina, in a low voice. "It is Monsieur V——, the great French traveller. He has but lately returned from Tschita. He had intended to go up the Amur and on to China, but gave it up on account of his health and returned to France. He is writing a book, I believe. He is the most difficult man to know, and though he is inundated with invitations, lives like a hermit and hates to dress like a

civilised creature. However, I get him here sometimes, because he is a sort of relation of mine, or rather of my husband's, and——"

She was interrupted by the approach of a servant.

"Monsieur V—— wishes to see Madame," the man said, respectfully. "He is in the conservatory. He will not enter the salon. He begs to say that he has something of importance to communicate to Madame."

The little Countess looked round on the group beside her with delight.

"He *has* come, then. Raoul, *mon ami*, come and receive him. And you, Corinna," she added, "you must come too. He is sure to like you—he has spoken of you often."

"But, Nina," urged Corinna, "his

message seems to convey his wish to see you alone."

"Oh, that is only his shyness," laughed the little Countess. "I never pay attention to those messages. Come."

She hurried off, and when the others somewhat reluctantly followed, they found her endeavouring to persuade Monsieur V—— to remove his overcoat and stay.

As the tall, stately figure of Corinna appeared, he looked at her with grave scrutiny and seemed to hesitate.

Madame Nina introduced them rapidly. He bowed low, and then turned again to the Countess.

"I really must beg you to excuse me, Madame," he said, "I have only brought you a message from a friend. You know I have but just returned from Russia. This gentleman I met there, and

had the good fortune to do him a service. We came back to Paris together, and he wished me to say to you these words, 'Tell your friend, Loris Fedoroff is safe.' That is all."

There was a faint exclamation, and a cry of surprise. Corinna staggered back and stood white and trembling beside one of the marble pillars. Madame Nina had almost screamed with amazement. The message had been delivered in so abrupt and matter-of-fact a way, that she had hardly realised what was coming until the name of Loris Fedoroff was pronounced.

"Good Heavens ;" she cried, "do you mean to say Fedoroff is here in Paris—free—safe ? Why, it is a miracle ! It is incredible !"

A grim smile crossed the face of the great traveller. "I come from the land of miracles, Madame," he said, gravely. "I have seen and heard things so strange that I dare hardly whisper them, even in this land of comparative freedom. But now that my mission is accomplished you will permit me to retire."

"I shall do no such thing," exclaimed Madame Nina. "Now you are here you must stay. I have the most charming Russian Countess in my salon. Do come and be introduced to her; and you can compare notes."

"I think you had better look to your friend," he answered, quietly; "she is fainting."

"No, no," said Corinna, striving to overcome the deadly weakness creeping

over her whole frame. "I am well—it is nothing, Nina, only the—surprise——"

She fell back ; her eyes closed.

A blissful unconsciousness sealed her startled senses.

CHAPTER VII.

“A LAST MESSAGE.”

ILBERT BRANDON had been to England and received the congratulations and wonders of his friends and relatives as to his safety after so extraordinary a tour.

In truth they thought him a little mad and most astonishingly changed. His brother, whom he had installed at the Manor, tried in vain to persuade him to remain there. The county families, with whom he was a personage of no small importance, called again and again, and

were prepared to welcome him back with open arms ; but he turned a deaf ear to their entreaties and persuasions. Finally, they all agreed that foreign life had spoiled him, and only wondered he had not brought some French, or Italian woman back as mistress of Brandon Court.

But Brandon paid little heed to what was said or thought of him. He had only come for a whiff of English air, he said ; for some of his favourite rambles over the free, breezy moorland, for a look at the old beautiful place which had been the roof-tree of many generations of Brandons. Satisfied with a taste of these things, he had gone again before people had become reconciled to his appearance.

His mind was full of Corinna. He had not told her of his return from St. Petersburg, because that return seemed

to him a breaking of his compact. He resolved to abide by that mysterious communication, and wait till the time spoken of for Fedoroff's return. If he did not come, he would go to Russia at once, and give himself no rest until he had procured some satisfactory information regarding him.

He arrived in Paris the day before the four months had expired. On the morning in question he went straight to the house where he had left the packet given him by his ill-fated comrade of the Algerian campaign.

It was a small house in the Passage de la Madeleine, and it was only when he found himself face to face with the *concierge*, that he recollected he knew no one living there, and was at a loss how to frame his inquiries.

The man threw a rapid glance over him, then bowed.

"Monsieur l'Anglais is expected," he said in a low voice. "Will he be pleased to ascend to the *entresol*—then knock twice at the door facing him. He will find his friends there."

Brandon was somewhat surprised. But he began to be hopeful. Had he known that he was entering one of the secret meeting-places of the Nihilist society in Paris, he might not have felt so comfortable. He mounted the stairs and knocked twice as directed. The door opened immediately. Before him stood a dark, Jewish-looking man, who flashed a swift comprehensive glance over the stranger.

"Monsieur l'Anglais?" he said, interrogatively.

"Yes," said Brandon, somewhat stiffly. He wondered how it was he seemed to carry his nationality so very ostensibly.

“Monsieur will please to enter.”

He stepped aside, and Brandon saw a large room furnished something like an office, with desks and tables. At each desk sat a man, some young, some gray and bent, but all apparently engaged in copying from huge folios which lay before them.

The Jew went straight down the room and opened a door at the further end. Then he led his companion through a dark carpeted passage, and paused before another door, over which fell heavy *portières*. Here he knocked softly, then made a sign to Brandon, and together they entered a small bed-chamber. Seated in a chair by the fire was a bent, wasted figure—the figure of a man. As the changed face turned itself towards the opening door, Brandon started and gave an involuntary exclamation.

Was this, *could* this be Loris Fedoroff?

The dark blue eyes looked wearily, languidly at him; the face was thin and hollow; the soft, bright hair above the temples was white as snow. Involuntarily he hurried forward and took the outstretched hands.

"Good God, Fedoroff! Is it really you?" he cried.

"Am I so changed?" answered the well-known musical voice, now weak and listless from long suffering and privation. "Yes, it is indeed I. You may well stare at me, Brandon. I have gone through enough to change two ordinary men. That damned Russia!"

He hissed out those last words with a savage ferocity in strange contrast to his weakness.

"But how are you here—who saved

you?" asked Brandon, wonderingly. "I did my best, but I could learn nothing, and then I was told you would be in Paris at a certain date, and here I find you."

"It is a long story," said Loris, faintly; "I can scarcely tell you myself. Only that the man who saved me is one of the Secret Brotherhood. After threatening my life over and over again, they suddenly took the other tack and preserved it. Perhaps they thought I would join them after such a taste of the Holy Czar's consideration. I don't even know what I was accused of."

"And do they know you have escaped?" inquired Brandon, eagerly.

"I believe not," said Fedoroff. "V——, who saved me, left a servant of his in my place at the mines, a man who has

escaped twice before, and has every trick and dialect of the country at his finger's ends. V—— lived for two years in Eastern Siberia once, in order to collect materials for a book, and this man was a convict, whom he took into his service."

"But your rights, your property," asked Brandon.

Loris smiled bitterly.

"All confiscated, of course. I dare not claim them unless my innocence is proved, and I can take no steps to do that for fear of being again kidnapped. Oh, it is a precious country! Why—here in Paris—my life is hardly safe from day to day. The Russian police have spies everywhere, and the Nihilist police are watching them. We live in pleasant times, do we not? My position is unique, to say the least of it. I am an enemy to

those who have befriended me, and was the friend of those who betrayed me."

"You look very ill," said Brandon, compassionately.

"I feel it," he answered. "I shudder to look back on this past year. When I was brought to this place, they told me you would come and remove me. I confess I was puzzled. I could not imagine why you should have interested yourself in my fate. We were never friends."

"True," said Brandon, coldly. "But I served you less for your own sake, than for that of the woman you wronged. Her life but lives in yours, separated as you are."

A faint colour came into Fedoroff's ghastly face.

"Have you recent news of her?" he asked. "Is she well? Has she heard of this?"

"She has been very near to death," said Brandon. "Her child's loss, added to her sufferings, was a terrible blow."

"The child!" muttered Loris, faintly. "Is he—dead?"

"Yes, he died soon after your secretary, Michael, wrote to her of your misfortunes."

"Poor girl," said Loris, brokenly. "What have I not made her suffer! Has she heard that—that Nadia—is dead?"

"No," said Brandon, curtly; "I left that fact for your telling. Your hand has dealt her sorrow enough. It is time it held out some better promise."

Loris bent his head—he was too deeply moved for speech.

"You are very generous," he said at last. "I—I cannot find words to thank you. You shame me. It is you she

should have loved. You are far worthier of her than I."

"She gave her heart to you," said Brandon, coldly. "And fate has been kinder to you than you deserve, for it has given you at last the power to atone."

"And I will, God helping me," muttered Loris, as he bent his head in involuntary humility.

Great tears of weakness filled his eyes, and rolled down his pale cheeks.

Brandon stood silently beside him, lost in thought. His face grew dark as he looked on this—his foe. A bitter rage swept over his heart and turned all its pity and compassion to wrath.

Is there anything harder for a great nature to bear, than to see its gold rejected for another's offering of dross?

A few moments and the anger died. He sighed heavily.

"Can I do anything for you?" he said. "Do you wish to remain here?"

"I cannot help myself," said Loris, despairingly. "I am still too weak and ill to be moved. I sent a message to her — through her friend the Countess Floralia. I thought she would be glad to hear I was free. I suppose she is at the château still?"

"I cannot tell you," said Brandon. "I have not heard anything since I left St. Petersburg. Why do you not write — you are free now?"

"I—I am ashamed," faltered Loris. "I have wronged her so—and I seem to have no right to address her. My courage fails me when I think of all I gave her to bear. It would need an angel to forgive."

He covered his face with his dry, hot hands. Brandon saw they trembled like a woman's.

"You know very little of her if you think she will not forgive all," he said with some bitterness. "You have only to say you are weak—ill—suffering——"

"At least leave me some grain of manliness," cried Loris, indignantly. "Do you think I would appeal to a woman's pity, who once had held all the fulness and richness of her love? Never—I would die first!"

Brandon looked searchingly at him, his own face gathering resolution—force—almost severity.

"I think adversity has not harmed you," he said, briefly. "Farewell now. You are too weak for visitors. I will come to-morrow."

He had gone almost before Loris had realised his departure.

He sat there for long, with bent head and sorrow-haunted eyes, like a man stricken with heavy grief, and burdened with sad memories. He raised his head at last, and drew towards him a small table with writing materials.

"There is but one way to atone," he muttered. "I will set her free; she shall not feel herself bound to me any longer. Brandon shall take her this, my last—message. If I ever send her another, it will be because her own lips bid me—not my selfish will."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MESSAGE ANSWERED.

“ DID not think I was so weak and foolish,” said Corinna, some two hours later, to her friend.

The guests had departed, the lights were extinguished, and Madame Nina, in a bewitching *robe de chambre* that was, like a dream of azure, clouded and veiled in lace, sat by her friend's bedside.

“No more did I,” laughed the little Countess. “After braving so much bad news and trouble, to faint at what is

good! Well, it shows you are but a woman after all. Sorrow has humanised you. And now what do you intend to do?"

"I can do nothing," said Corinna, hopelessly. "We are parted as much as ever."

"There should be a law of divorce for lunatics," muttered Madame Nina, viciously. "To think of you two unfortunates, wasting your hearts and lives in all this misery just because of that Muscovite fury! *Bah*—it is horrible."

"You forget," said Corinna, quietly. "It is not her fault."

Madame Nina was silent. "I wish V—— had told us how he managed," she said presently. "It must be quite a romance. From what the Countess Boreskoff said, escaping from Siberia is no easy matter. And I believe Loris might

be re-taken even here. The 'Third Section' have their tools and officers in Paris as well as in Russia. I wonder where Fedoroff is concealed?"

"If it were only possible to prove his innocence, to procure his pardon," murmured Corinna in troubled accents.

"My dearest," cried the Countess, energetically, "you really have martyred yourself enough. Fedoroff is safe at present, and even if he be eternally banished from Holy Russia, *that* won't break his heart."

"But his property — how is he to live? He will lose everything!" continued Corinna.

"He can work, I suppose," said the Countess, dryly. "Other men have had to do it before him. The best thing he could do would be to emigrate. There are

vast fields open for energy and enterprise, and as you and he are to be eternally parted, the greater the distance you put between yourselves the better. Besides, he could get out of the groove of his 'professional' circle. All the world cannot hold spies of the Third Section, or 'Red' Brotherhood. And he has been unfortunate enough to offend both."

To her intense surprise Corinna rose from her pillows and flashed an angry and indignant glance at her.

"You are very unkind," she said, passionately — then her voice broke into a storm of sobs. "Oh, my poor Loris!" she cried. "Ill—suffering—friendless—and alone. It breaks my heart to think of you!"

"Don't do it, then," said Madame Nina, rising. "Think of—Brandon."

The next day Brandon called and asked to see Madame Nina.

He was shown into her boudoir, and there found—Corinna. Surprise deprived him of all words. He had no idea she was in Paris, and he found himself in her presence. Her surprise was equally great, though with none of the pain that held this strong man white and speechless by her side.

“Dear friend,” she said at last, “how good of you to come, and how am I ever to find words to thank you for your services? You know Loris has escaped—he is in Paris.”

“Yes,” said Brandon, steadying his voice by a great effort, “I have seen him.”

“Seen him!” Her face changed from red to white, her eyes looked terrified, wild, beseeching.

“No, he is not here,” answered

Brandon, reading only too well the meaning of that look. "He could not come even if he would. He is too ill."

Her hand went to her heart. Her very lips grew white. "Ill—not dangerously ill? You have not come to tell me that?"

"Russia has done her best to kill him by way of gratitude for his loyalty," said Brandon, coldly. "But do not look so alarmed. He is only weak; suffering from the hardships and privations he had to endure. In a few months——"

"Months!" she interrupted. "Did you say months? Then he must be ill, terribly ill. Oh, my God! and I sent him there," she continued, wildly. "And now I cannot even go to his side, or help him. Oh, what I have cost him!"

"*You!*" cried Brandon, and caught his breath and stood gazing at her, amazed—wrathful—almost stupefied. "Will you

never think of yourself?" he said, with sudden passion. "Has he not sacrificed your life to his selfishness, and yet——"

"And yet I love him just the same," she said, quite simply; "I cannot help it."

He moved aside as if a blow had struck him. At last he said, almost harshly :

"It is well your love is so great, for now you can prove it as you will. He is free."

She looked at him bewildered — not understanding.

"Free? Yes—yes; I know. But what difference does that make?"

"All the difference, I should say," Brandon answered almost fiercely, for pain and wrath tugged hard at his heart, and he was but human after all. "Nadia is dead—that is the freedom I mean. Nothing stands between you and Loris now. He is too proud to come to you; he knows he is penniless, exiled,

homeless ; and he knows, too, that he has wronged you almost beyond forgiveness. You are not to consider yourself bound to him in any one way. These are his words. See, here I have them, written as he wrote them to me last night. He absolves you from all promises. He will be to you as one dead—if that is your wish. This is what he bids me say ; this is his message—his *last* message through me. What is your answer ?”

She rose to her feet. Her face was very white, but a warmth like the glow of summer ran through all her veins.

“I will take it to him—myself,” she said, and blushed red as any rose of June.

Brandon did not speak. He only bent low, and took both her hands in his, and kissed them with cold, pale lips.

And so, with no other word, they parted.

“EDELWEISS.”

INTRODUCTION.

“THE DREAM.”

HE great mountains reared themselves in an imposing mass nearly six thousand feet above the blue waters of the Vierwaldstätter See.

Snow still crowned their mighty brows, though base and sides were clothed in leafage, and beautiful with curtaining boughs, and fronds of young green ferns, and new up-springing grasses. The last warm sun-rays lingered on the heights, and lit up the blueness of the

sky and the crests of the different altitudes. But in the valley below the soft dusk crept along with noiseless steps, folding the pretty villages in tender arms, and hushing every sound with the spell of its own restfulness.

A man was resting half-way down the mountain side, watching, with dreamy eyes, the changing colours of the sky, and the magic of the gathering twilight.

He was a poet, and poets have strange fancies; and he had had many in his time, and had written beautiful things, and the world called him great. He had been to the topmost point of the Rigi that day, and was fatigued, and weary, and so he sat there now to rest himself, and his hand played idly with a little sprig of edelweiss he had gathered in a cleft of the mountain.

Below him was a deep gorge, its steep sides clothed with firs—a rocky, dangerous precipice spanned by a frail little bridge. Beside this bridge had been erected a little wooden cross, and on that cross was carved a name—the name of the flower he held in his hand—“*Edelweiss.*”

He wondered what was the story of that little cross? He was given to making stories for himself out of all sorts of odd materials, but sometimes he liked to hear a real one, and he thought there must be a real one appended to this.

“*Edelweiss!*” Just the name of the little Alpine flower he held in his hand. The little, hardy, simple thing that grows among the snow-heights, with nothing green or fragrant to share its solitude, unlike its sister flowers of wood and field.

"Edelweiss!" Was it the name of any one? Had it any meaning—any history—any legend of these great cold peaks which towered above him now with the golden sun-rays for their crown?

The twilight crept on apace, the valleys and the waters turned from dusk to dark. A faint gray mist crept up the leafy path, and clung about the pine boughs and the deep gorge into which he gazed. He watched its strange, soft, intangible beauty clinging in ghostly fashion to the outstretched arms of the trees, shrouding the precipitous descent; and as he watched he saw it part, and gliding through its filmy curtains came a slender figure—the figure of a girl with rippling golden hair that clothed her like light, and on her brow the star-like flower of the edelweiss.

She came up that steep and stony

precipice with feet that scarcely seemed to touch the ground. Nearer and nearer he saw her advancing, and his curiosity deepened into wonder, and his wonder into awe, for it seemed to him that never mortal foot could tread that frightful path, or mortal form be borne along its perilous ascent with such winged speed as this.

By the little wooden cross where he was seated the figure paused. A white moon had shown itself in the sky above, and its clear light fell upon the slender girl's form, and the wealth of hair, and the deep and mournful eyes. Surprised, yet not alarmed, the poet raised himself upon his elbow, and spoke.

"Who are you?" he asked. His voice sounded muffled and far away — he felt like one in a dream.

Then it seemed as if the moonlight grew dazzling, and a flood of liquid silver poured itself over the white and cloud-like draperies, and the mantle of shining hair.

She stood by the cross, and her hand rested on it.

Her lips parted, a glow of life and colour seemed to quiver through face and form, like a flame that shines behind alabaster.

"I am Edelweiss," she said, sadly. "Here I had no other name. I used to think the mountains gave me birth, even as I know they gave me—death."

Her eyes drooped, her curved mouth grew sorrowful. But sweeter than any music was the voice that once more raised its plaintive tones :

"I was young to die—ah yes!—but

not too young to love. I can remember it all so well, and how for *his* life I gave my own. I think, sometimes, that will keep me in his memory, and then—some day—when we meet again, he will know me, and thank me for some years of happiness given to him at the cost of mine. He put this cross here — here where I found my death. Sometimes he will come and look at it, and remember. That is enough for me. I am only ‘Edelweiss.’”

The moon was covered by a heavy cloud. The gray mists grew more dense and chill. There was a faint sigh among the pine-boughs, and the radiant figure seemed to grow indistinct.

“Stay!” called the listener. “Tell me your story, if you can. I will weave it into words and it shall live, and the

world shall hear of it, and of you who were brave enough to give life for love—child as you seem."

The faint voice stole back through the misty shadows, fainter, sweeter than before.

"Love alone outlasts life ; it is stronger than death, or hate, or all things that men cherish, and deify, and adore. I have no story but that. I loved, and for love's sake I perished. This cross bears my name. He who placed it here—remembers. For me, that is enough."

"THE AWAKING."

THE moon looked down upon the white snows of the mountain-crests. The mists

had faded like a dream. A fresh wind moved among the pine-boughs, and blew the lake-waters into lines of rippling silver.

Below all was darkness and silence in the sleeping villages of Wäggis and of Vitznau, and the night air had grown chill with falling dews.

The poet roused himself and stood upright, his eyes turned wonderingly to the bridge, the ravine, and the cross.

But there was no cross there, and in his hand lay only a spray of edelweiss.

Yet it seemed to him that something more than a dream must have peopled those misty shadows, and made them thrill and quiver as with a living presence. The presence of a love faithful unto death, and, like death, silent.

He took his way down the steep, rough path, with only the moon-rays to light it. His brain felt dizzy and strange. A crowd of thoughts, sorrowful, perplexed, bewildering, kept time to his restless feet, and set themselves to the rhythm of a hundred fancies.

When a man has the eye of a painter, and the soul of a poet, and loves the wild solitudes of mountain and forest, and the music of wind and waters, and the changeful beauty of the wide heaven, and all and everything that makes earth a wonder, and life a joy, it is no marvel if from these sights and sounds he draws the hidden music of sweet dreams, and weaves them into histories that seem to him real.

So the poet placed the edelweiss in his breast and took his way down the

tourist-haunted mountain, to the little, gray, sheltered village set amidst its flowering chestnuts by the blue lake-waters.

And resting there, through the bright spring weather, and idling the hours away between the mountains and the valleys, he gave the rein to his fancy and wove into words the following romance.

Whether it holds in it some grain of truth, matters very little now, only be assured that if you go up the Rigi by foot, and stand beside the craggy wildness of the Schnürtoibel Bridge, you will see the little wooden cross and its simple carved device, and learn its history for yourself just as accurately as the poet learnt it.

But be equally assured that if you

make your pilgrimage thither in a matter-of-fact, or cynical, or simply curious spirit, you will no more see the cross, for gather the edelweiss, than did the poet when he awoke from—his dream.

CHAPTER I.

THE SNOWFLOWER.

HAT was the name old Hans Krauss had given her. His snowflower — his little white foundling, discovered by him one sunny April morning, half hidden in a nook in the mountains.

How she had come there was a mystery. It was too early in the year for tourists, and the mountains around and about Vitznau still wore their snow-coverings, though in the villages below and on the sloping sides of those great

heights, the trees were budding into leafage as the sun daily acquired more power.

On that eventful April morning, now fifteen years back, old Krauss had left his little cabin, and begun the steep ascent that leads to the Rigi-Kulm.

It was very early; gray mists still floated overhead. The birds were scarcely awake among the fluttering leaves; the bleat of a kid in the distance had an odd, little, muffled sound, and the tiny water-runners were chasing each other down the steep ways as if in a mighty hurry to make up for the time they had lost, while the Frost King had locked them into their frozen winter sleep. Over the peaks of the Rigi, and the Jungfrau, and the Wetterhorn, the day was breaking in all its golden glory of sunrise, and old

Krauss had halted for a moment as he climbed the steep ascent and looked at the familiar scene with his glad and honest eyes, as if its beauty were still new, and still wonderful.

He had lived among these scenes ever since he could remember—a child, a youth, a man—and he loved them with that steadfast, dogged love that is born of the soil and the constant association with one spot, round which cluster all the memories of life. His life had been a hard one, and often enough rough, toilsome, full of fatigues, and struggles, and difficulties, but not an unhappy life for all that. His nature was too simple, his heart too tender and honest, his temper too cheerful and gay, for any demon of discontent to find entrance.

That April day, fifteen years back, had

been a sorrowful one, it is true, for he had only come up the evening before to the little cabin on the high, steep mountain sides, and for the first time for many years he had come—alone.

His wife had died, and he had buried her in the little church-yard at Vitznau, and, lonely and childless, he had come to his summer nook and his summer work with a great sorrow to weight his heart, and a great shadow to darken his life.

It was too early for tourists, unless chance led some restless or adventurous spirit thither, as sometimes happened; but Hans Krauss had thought he would make his way to those familiar spots on the heights where he had been used to look for edelweiss. In heart Krauss was a pure mountaineer. He loved to see the gray mists of daybreak roll away before the

touch of the first sun-rays ; he loved to feel the breath of the cool, rich air as he climbed upwards and upwards to the summits of the great peaks ; he loved, above all, that intense and breathless solitude that thrones Nature in a majesty of its own, that no presence can overthrow, and no civilisation dares to desecrate.

He had the mountains all to himself. His compatriots had not troubled to come here yet, and he plodded on—on through the beautiful rosy daybreak, and amidst the breath and sounds of spring, feeling his heart grow lighter at every step, though he could have given no reason for the feeling.

Perhaps if he could, the sensation would have lost its grace and beauty. Self-analysis is the outcome of an over-refined and morbid civilisation. It dissects every

feeling and emotion with merciless precision ; it peers and pries into the delicate mechanism of the mind ; it puts the heavy brake of persistent explanation on the more subtle flights of intelligence, and, cumbered and weighted and oppressed in this fashion, the spirit vainly tries to soar into the purer ether of fancy and feeling.

Hans Krauss was only a simple peasant with few needs and fewer ambitions. Sunlight, beauty, the sense of strength and freedom--these were in themselves blessings he could appreciate and value ; he did not trouble to explain why.

It was chill up on those mountain heights in the early morning, even though the sun was momentarily gathering power and the snows were melting fast. Here and there were little nooks softly carpeted with mossy grass, or bright with peeping

flower-bells, but he saw no edelweiss; and he went on further and higher, until quite suddenly he stopped and stared like one in amaze, for there, in a nook where the snows had melted, and wrapped warmly and closely in a rough goatskin cloak such as shepherds wear, lay a little child some few months old.

It was sound asleep. The little downy head, and rose-like cheeks, and dimpled hands were peeping out of its rough coverlet, and Hans Krauss stood and stared as if he could not at all reconcile the fact of its presence to his startled senses.

Having at last satisfied himself that it was a living creature, he bent down and tenderly raised the little bundle. The child slept placidly on. He forgot all about the edelweiss and his intention of spending the day on the mountains.

He made his way back to his little cabin, and the child never woke till he reached it. When she looked up at last and the blue eyes smiled at him, a strange emotion rushed through his honest breast. He had so mourned his loneliness, and surely the saints must have sent this companion as a consolation! Otherwise, how could she have come to that mountain nook, and lain there safe and unharmed? He kept the child there, and in company with the kid she shared the milk of his solitary goat, and thrived and grew and became the joy and delight of his eyes. She was always with him, and her helplessness and beauty and sweetness made her dearer day by day.

The spring advanced, and the summer brought autumn tourists and travellers to the mountains, and the little steamers from Luzern plied merrily over the blue

lake-waters, and it seemed to Hans Krauss as if never had he been so fortunate, or strangers so generous, and he attributed such unusual luck to the presence of his little foundling.

His neighbours and friends laughed at him and wondered at him, and speculation was rife as to the child's parentage and inexplicable appearance among them ; but Hans troubled himself no whit about what they said. The angels must have sent her—that was his opinion, and to that he kept.

He named her Edelweiss, and when the old priest at Vitznau rebuked it as heathenish, and gave her baptism and a saint's name sacred to the day of her discovery, he accepted it all without a murmur, but never changed his own appellation.

So time passed on, and years brought changes in their train, and the child grew and flourished in that pure, beautiful air, and now was tall and slender as a young fir-tree, and had a face beautiful as the morning, and was the very core and centre of all delight to old Hans Krauss, whom she believed to be her father, and always called so.

The winter months were always spent at Vitznau. Hans Krauss used to do wood-carving, or any odd jobs that were thrown in his way, and the child went to the village school, and learnt to read and sew, and spin and knit, and was altogether so quick, and so pretty, and so industrious, that again and again her foster-father thanked the saints for sending him such a treasure.

But Edelweiss loved best that time of

the year when the snows melted and the noons grew warm and bright, and she and Hans Krauss took their way to the little cabin perched high up in a sheltered nook of the mountain, there to stay till the days grew chill and the autumn tourists had gone, and the scanty harvest that could be gleaned from them had been gathered in. Sometimes ladies would come and sit at the cabin to chat and rest themselves, or drink a glass of goat's milk, or bargain for a chair to carry them to the highest points, where they might watch the sunset; and they were always generous to the pretty child, and many a mark, or thaler, would be put into the little brown hand as payment for the milk, or the wild-flowers, or the edelweiss that she sold them.

But this was in her childish days, and

before the advent of that triumph of engineering skill, the Rigi Railway, or the building of that monster hotel which brings hundreds where once scores only came.

Both these innovations had been a source of great trouble to Hans Krauss. He saw in them only a prospect of ruin and an utter desecration of the beauty and solitude of the mountains.

True, guides had never been needed very much, for the Rigi is not like its famous and difficult Alpine sisterhood. Still, he had always found opportunities for his services, and could point out the quickest and easiest modes of ascent, and the best views; and having, in a way, become known as useful, and honest, and intelligent, he had managed to make those summer and autumn months very profit-

able. Now all would be changed. At first he had thought people must be mad to talk of making a railway up a mountain, and believed it an impossibility; but, as time went on, he found it was steadily progressing, and all the beautiful solitude was disturbed by sounds of axe, and pick, and snorting engines, and hiss of steam, and rough voices of workmen, and the incessant din and traffic necessary for so great a work.

To Edelweiss it was a source of constant wonder and interest. She was a tall, slender girl now, of sixteen years, with the same frank, beautiful eyes, and golden hair, and tender, serious smile of her childhood—a girl as innocent and pure as the flower whose name she bore, and with a nature as simple and content as that of Hans Krauss himself.

One June evening, towards sunset, she was sitting by herself some distance off the line of operations, watching the men at work.

Before that autumn was over the line would be complete; the following year it would be opened.

As her grave eyes followed the movements of the men, she saw a figure approach which of late had attracted a good deal of her attention and interest. She had heard he was a young Austrian, an engineer, who was a friend of the superintendent of the men.

The superintendent had often spoken to her, and even explained many things about the new wonder, and the ingenious method to be used for working it. She had rather a confused idea of leverage, and grooves, and cog-wheels, and ma-

chinery, and the working of brakes; but it seemed to her very wonderful—almost supernatural, in fact—and she tried often to explain it to Hans Krauss.

On this particular evening she was waiting for the old man, who had gone to the top of the Rigi to show a stranger the best point of view. She had a bunch of wild flowers in her hand; her head was uncovered, and caught all the last brightness of the sun-rays among its gold; her eyes were fixed in grave observance on the group of men who had left off work, and were talking to the young engineer.

Some difficulty seemed to have arisen respecting the nature of the ground. One of the men at last pointed to the girl.

"Ask her," he said in his rough

German ; "she knows every step of the way between Vitznau and the Kulm. The line must curve here ; it's not possible to take it straight."

There was a little more talking, then Edelweiss saw the stranger approaching, and colouring with some sudden access of bashfulness, she rose to her feet.

He looked at her with surprise. Her dress was only a peasant's dress ; her head was bare, her hands brown from exposure, and rough with hard work ; but yet there was an indescribable air of refinement and delicacy about her aspect and manner which seemed to speak of something not akin to a peasant's nature. He put his questions to her, and she answered them briefly and simply,

even though her colour came and went, and her heart was beating nervously beneath its linen bodice at the deference in the young man's tone, the involuntary homage of his eyes. She did not know that he was artist enough to feel the picture she made, standing there in the glow of sunlight, with the poppies and grasses in her hands, and the wind softly stirring the loose gold hair above her brow. Having gained the information he wished, he went back and gave some orders to the men, then strolled off, and followed in the track she had taken among the pine-trees and firs.

He came up to her as she halted by a rough seat put up by Krauss himself. She raised her hand to her eyes to shade them from the sun, and looked up the

mountain as far as she could see. The old man was not yet in sight.

As her hand dropped she heard a foot-fall, and looked round. The young Austrian was just beside her.

"May I sit here a while and rest?" he asked, softly; "and will you tell me where you live and all about yourself? Surely I have seen you somewhere before. Your face is strangely familiar."

"I am always here," she said, in her grave, simple way. "No doubt you have seen me often."

"And your name?" he questioned. "The men over there called you Edelweiss; is that really your name?"

"Yes," she answered, her colour deepening a little as she met his eyes. "My father, who found me there in the mountains, called me that. I say my father,

for I have known no other. I think I could have loved no other—better."

"Found there in the mountains!" he echoed, wonderingly. "Who could have left you to such a fate?"

"I cannot tell. I shall never know," she answered, simply. "It was not kind, I think. I might have died so easily. Few people ever come to the Rigi in that season, and the snow was still on the ground, and upon the higher clefts. My father found me in one."

"And that is all you know of yourself?" he asked, in surprise.

"Yes. It is enough, is it not? I have lived here or at Vitznau all the time. The people love me and are kind to me, and I am happy."

"Happy!" he echoed, somewhat vaguely. "Ah yes—no doubt. They know you;

they would think no worse of you for your story; that is the best of being poor."

"Why should they think worse of me? I have done nothing wrong," she said, looking up at him with her frank blue eyes.

An odd little smile came to his lips.

"My child, if you were a little less innocent, you would know well enough that we have to carry other burdens besides our own, and suffer for other faults besides those we have committed. You are right. Why should they think the worse of you? There is no reason whatever. And so you live here in these mountain solitudes all the year round, and are happy? Do you know I envy you that confession?"

"Is it so rare to be happy?" she asked, a little puzzled by his tone.

"Very," he answered. "In the world, at least."

"Ah," she said, softly, "but then I don't know the world; it never troubles me. I have lived here always; I hope I shall live here always. Sometimes I think I should like to know a little more. They teach us so little at the school. But the priests say too much book-learning is not good; and, after all, what use would it be to me?"

He looked at her again with that close and earnest regard that puzzled, and in a way troubled her.

"What use—— Well, perhaps you are right. No one can be more than happy. You said you were that. But you are only a child yet. How old are you?"

"I am sixteen—so my father reckons."

"Sixteen, and you live in a cabin, and eat black bread, and work all the year round, and your life contents you?" murmured the young man, musingly. "That seems odd."

"Does it?" she said, and smiled frankly as she met his eyes — beautiful eyes they were. Dark, and earnest, and full of a strange, soft light. She thought she had never seen any like them.

"Perhaps you are rich and great," she went on in that pretty *patois* that was neither Swiss nor German, but yet which he understood easily enough. "Then it must seem strange to you, of course."

He laughed a little harshly.

"I am not rich," he said, "or great. I wish I were."

She would have liked to have told

him, what in some way she dimly felt —that perhaps by very reason of that discontent, he had missed the road to happiness which she had found so easily.

CHAPTER II.

AS SHADOWS FALL.

THERE came a long silence after those words. Conrad von Reichenberg was watching the girl as she stood a little distance away from him, her earnest eyes intent upon that distant path where the well-known figure of Hans Krauss would appear.

“For whom are you looking?” asked the young man presently. “A lover?”

She turned her eyes to his in grave rebuke.

“I watch for my father,” she answered.

“I have no lover. That is what the girls in the village talk about. It is so odd, how they quarrel about Hans, and Fritz, and Friedrich, and Karl; and they are so stupid, all of them!”

He laughed.

“How flattering to Hans, and Fritz, and the rest of their brotherhood! But you could scarcely expect them to be anything but stupid, could you? They are like the cattle, who work all day in the fields, and go to rest at sundown; plodding, honest, industrious, no doubt, but brainless. And so you have no lover. Well, you are young yet. Time will mend that mistake.”

His light tone jarred on her. She felt perplexed and disturbed. She looked at the handsome, dark face, but the mockery on it disconcerted her.

"You mean that I am stupid, too," she said. "Yes, of course, I know that; only——"

"Only, there are different degrees of stupidity," he interposed. "You are right; but pray don't imagine I had any such unflattering thought of you. Ignorance does not imply stupidity—far from it. Yet it brings more happiness than knowledge does. The more we know, the more we want to know. Yet we never know enough before the book is closed for ever."

"May there not be something more to learn—afterwards?" she said, timidly.

Her quick fancy had followed him with ease. To her it always seemed so much easier to think than to speak.

He looked at her in surprise.

"Do the priests tell you that?"

"Oh no; I never speak to them of my fancies. Of course they are old, and full of learning. They would only laugh."

That odd little smile again shadowed the lips of Conrad von Reichenberg.

"You think so? You have not heard of the wisdom of simplicity, then? A child's questioning has puzzled many a wise head before now. How earnestly you look up that mountain path! Is your father in sight yet?"

"No," she answered, somewhat troubled; "and he said, at sunset. I can't think what delays him."

"He may have gone further than he intended," said her companion. "Do not be anxious. After all, it is very little past the hour. Has he never broken faith with you?"

"Never," she answered, proudly ; "nor with any one. You do not know how good he is."

"I will take your word for it," said the young man, lightly. "I wish you would sit down here instead of standing ; you will be tired."

"I am never tired," she answered, simply, "and it would not be seemly for such as I to sit beside you. You are a gentleman, and I am only a peasant."

"What of that?" he said, gravely. "You might sit beside me if I ask you."

She shook her head.

"There are many of the great, and rich, and noble who come here to our mountains. My father always says to me : 'Where you can render service do so, but never importune, and never take

payment unless you have done something to earn it. Above all, keep your own place, and preserve your own self-respect.' I am only a peasant, *Mein Herr*; it is not fitting that I should sit by your side."

"Have you ever read the story of Aschenbrödel?" he asked, with a smile in his brown eyes. "She was a kitchen-wench by force of circumstances, yet a prince wedded her. How do you know you are really a peasant?"

"What else could I be?" she asked, simply. "Hans Krauss used to tell me when I was little that the fairies had left me in the mountains, but the girls in the village laughed, and so at last I begged him to tell me the truth. It made me very sad for a time, but it was better I should know."

"Women have a fancy for brushing

off illusions," he said, curtly, and a shadow came over his eyes that were like clear brown waters. "They could not let you rest content with yours. Feminine nature is true to itself, even in a village."

"They are very good to me though," she said, with eager championship; "every one is that. I do not think I could in any way be happier than I am."

"Do you not?" he said, smiling at the earnest face touched and lightened into a more spiritual beauty by the faint light that lingered in this dusky nook. "I wish you could teach me your secret. Do you really feel that there is nothing more for you to do, or to care about in life, than to sew and spin, and milk your goats, and gather your wild flowers, and minister to the simple wants of your foster-father?"

“To do — no,” she answered. “To care about — well, that is different. I should like to read better, and to know a little more. This railway, for instance; my father and the peasant-folk used to say it was witchcraft and the work of the Evil One; but I have seen the books and the plans, and I know if they can teach men all that, they must be wonderful indeed.”

“Yes, they are,” he said, gravely. “All of life that is worth knowing or learning, books can teach you; but after their knowledge comes another, easier to gain, but scarcely so pleasant in the gaining. We call it experience. It is learnt in the school of the world, not among your mountains and valleys, my child.”

“I would rather have the books,” she said, simply.

“A wise choice,” he said. “Shall I

lend you some? Can you read German, such as I speak?"

"Not very well," she answered, diffidently. "You see at the schools they teach you so little, and then I have not much time for reading. But I would try," she went on, eagerly. "My father speaks better German than I. He was in Wien and in Linz when he was young. He could help me."

"Wien? That is my birthplace," said her companion. "I have not been there for nearly two years, though. I have been travelling about in the interests of my profession."

"What is that?" she asked.

"An engineer," he answered. "That is why I have come to look at this wonderful work here. I am a friend of the chief-inspector."

"And you are a soldier, too, I suppose?"

"Of course—by necessity, not inclination. I should like to have been an artist, but my father opposed the wish. It is not always possible to follow one's own inclinations, you know."

He paused abruptly. It struck him as a little odd that he should be talking in this confidential fashion to a little peasant-girl with a childish face and blue eyes.

He drew out his watch.

"I must be making my way to the village," he said. "Shall I see you to-morrow, and bring you the book I promised?"

"If it be not too much trouble, *Mein Herr*," she said, colouring brightly.

"It won't be that," he said, laugh-

ing. "And now good-night. I hope your vigil won't have to last much longer. I——"

Something cut short his words—a cry from paling lips, a sudden frightened gesture as the girl pointed up the mountain-path, down which a slow and halting procession was slowly approaching.

"Lieber Himmel!" she ejaculated. "What has happened? Is it—is it my father?"

He, too, looked with anxious scrutiny at the slow progress of the group, who seemed to be supporting some helpless burden.

"Don't look so frightened," he said, gently. "There has been an accident, doubtless, but it may be only one of the tourists."

She never seemed to hear him. She

started off with the speed of a hare. After a moment's hesitation he followed. He saw the pretty, slender figure flash in and out among the shadowy firs. He saw the group halt and part at her approach. He saw her fall on her knees beside the burden they carried, and then he, too, rushed forwards over the rough, narrow path.

“What is it?” he asked the men eagerly.

“He fell down an incline. The ground gave way, they say. His back is broken.”

“And who is he?”

“He is my father,” sobbed the girl, wildly. “My father, and he is dying, they say. Dying! *Lieber Gott*, what shall I do—what shall I do?”

The piteous, heart-broken appeal thrilled out on the silence with a despair that

touched every heart. The young Austrian bent over the prostrate figure. He saw the old man had fainted.

"Perhaps the injuries are not so great," he said, gently. "I have some small knowledge of surgery ; get him to his cabin, and I will examine him."

The men raised the rough litter they had made. The girl rose to her feet ; her sobs seemed frozen, her tears no longer fell. So, slowly and in silence, the little procession moved down the mountain side in the soft June dusk, none speaking or daring to speak of the dread that each heart shared.

When they reached the little cabin they laid him on his bed, and Conrad von Reichenberg tore off the rough shirt and waistcoat and examined the injuries of the wounded man.

One look was enough. With a shudder he turned away.

"He is dead already," he said softly to the men, so that she, waiting there in the summer dusk, might not hear him.

But the stillness and the silence told her their own tale. She thrust the door open and came forward. They looked at her compassionately.

"Nothing can be done," they said. "You see he was old and heavy, and the fall was a bad one."

She never seemed to hear. She went up and looked at the features in their frozen calm; her warm young hands touched in vain appeal those lifeless, nerveless ones that lay so helpless and unresponsive now.

"Is this—death?" she whispered,

strangely. "Not three hours back he was with me, and spoke to me, and I kissed him ; now——"

Then she fell down on her knees with one faint, piteous moan.

"Father — father, I had only you. Oh, come back to me — come back to me !"

CHAPTER III.

AWAKING.

HE first touch of sorrow falls with a strange, terrible chill on the young.

The little mountain maid suffered keenly when she found herself bereft of the tender guardian who had for so long stood to her in the place of all nearer relationship.

The days passed on, but she took no heed of them. A sort of stupor was upon her: she could scarcely realise that she was quite alone—that she must act and

think for herself. The friends of Hans Krauss came about her and consoled her, and the old priest told her there would be some little money for her from the sale of the little cabin and its simple furniture, and she listened to them all and thanked them in her grave, simple way, and fell to wondering what she should do now with her solitary life.

It was a Sunday evening when, for the first time since old Hans's death, she walked out and took the little path by the lake-side where she had so often walked with the dead man.

It was a beautiful, still evening; the birds were fluttering amongst the chestnut-boughs. The sky was gold above the far-off mountain-tops; the lovely blue water looked clear as sapphire where it rippled by the little path. Insensibly the

girl's heart grew lighter as she drank in the beauty of the scene. She stood quite still—there under the chestnut-trees—in her simple black gown, and with her fair uncovered head lifted up to the sunlight, and her rapt, soft eyes fixed earnestly on those rosy-tinted clouds that drifted round the golden portals of the day. Perhaps through them the tender heart she loved had passed into some vague, unknown world beyond; perhaps a new life had begun for him; perhaps he could see her—watch over her still. So her innocent thoughts ran on, till suddenly a shadow fell across her in the evening light, and a voice broke the spell of silence that had been filled with dreams.

“I am glad to see you out once more,” it said. “I hope you are better.”

She turned, colouring shyly at the remembered tones.

"I am quite well, I thank you," she said, in her grave, direct way; "and I have not been ill, only very—very unhappy."

The young Austrian saw the change in her face, but it seemed to him as if sorrow had only lent it a rarer charm, and the look in her eyes touched him as nothing had done yet. He could not offer her any common-place consolation; he felt it would be unworthy of such grief. He stood beside her in silence, and his eyes followed hers to those golden heights, where the glory of the day still lingered.

"Will you walk on with me?" he asked her, presently. "I should like to speak to you of your future. You are so lonely and unprotected, and perhaps I could serve

you in some way. I have so often wished to tell you, but I did not like to intrude upon your grief. Only now——"

"You are very kind to think of me at all," she interposed as he hesitated. "I—I do not know what I shall do. I must live on here, and work——"

Her voice trembled and broke. It was still so new to her to have to think of herself, and for herself.

"It will be best, no doubt," she went on, hurriedly. "The neighbours are kind, and I can earn my bread. I am not afraid."

"But do you really wish to stay here? Does this rough, hard life content you?" he asked, wondering. "It seems to me you are fitted for better things than working in the fields, and tending cattle, and all the coarse, homely cares of a peasant."

She looked up and met his eyes, and a strange trouble seemed to thrill her heart.

How handsome he was, and kind, and how different to the rough-mannered youths of the village!

"One must be content as one is," she answered, with a sigh that belied her words. "What I wish has nothing to do with it."

He would have liked to tell her that it might have a great deal to do with it, but something held him back—some innate sense of chivalry and compassion for the innocent youth, and simple soul that held such beauty of purity.

He walked on beside her in the summer dusk, and some few of the peasants and people of Vitznau meeting them, looked half askance at the girl, and nodded their

heads, and muttered to one another that no good could come of it.

Edelweiss noticed nothing of this. She answered their simple greetings in her usual grave and gentle way, and was in no whit proud of the honour of this young aristocrat's companionship. It was kind of him to notice her, to interest himself about her, but she knew how wide a gulf divided him from herself; still, that evening's walk was very pleasant.

He talked to her a great deal. He told her of beautiful cities which had been scarcely known to her even by name; of life in the great world, of art, and wealth, and fame; of himself, too, he told her—of his home, his childhood, his mother's death; his lonely youth, that had been chiefly spent in quaint, pretty Heitzing. Then of his father, and of the

beautiful young wife he had lately married, until the young girl grew absorbed in interest, and forgot her recent sorrows and anxieties in listening to this wonderful history.

At last a heavy step came sounding on the path behind them, and a voice called to the girl to stop. She looked back, and saw it was the great rough figure of Franz Brühl, the son of the richest farmer in Vitznau.

"The mother has sent me to bring you back to sup with us," he said in his gruff German *patois*, and looked at her companion with rude and angry stare.

The girl started and coloured in her shy fashion.

"Your mother is very good," she answered, gently. "But I do not wish to come to-night."

He stared at her stupidly, then a curious smile stole round his lips.

"I will tell her you are better employed," he said, rudely, and turned away.

The young Austrian looked at the retreating figure, and then at the girl's troubled face. He felt a little amused. This young boor was her lover, of course, and he was angered and jealous.

"Who is that?" he asked her as they moved on again through the deepening shadows of the woods.

"He is Franz Brühl," she answered, simply. "His people are very rich, so every one says, but I do not like them much."

"Nor Franz either?" he asked, smiling. "You have offended him, I fear."

"I am sorry," she answered. "But, indeed, I had no wish to go and

sup with them to-night. They are so rough and so noisy, and his brothers—they are often rude. My father did not like me to be with them."

"They thought you would be lonely, no doubt, and the invitation was kindly meant," he said. "Do you always answer people in that direct way?"

"I always tell the truth. That is right, is it not?" she said, looking up at his face.

"Yes; and you may tell me the truth now, if you will. Would you rather be walking with me than supping with your friends at the village? Is that why you refused?"

"I would rather be with you—oh, certainly; but I did not refuse the Brühls for that reason only. I have already told you why."

The sun had set now. There was a dull, red glow on the mountain heights. In the distant village lights began to twinkle star-like among the dusky trees.

Involuntarily Conrad von Reichenberg paused and looked down at the fair, flower-like face by his side. She was so beautiful, and so unconscious, and so good and pure. Certainly far too good to be thrown away on a rough boor like Franz Brühl. He lightly touched the little brown hand that hung by her side.

"I am glad you would rather be with me," he said, softly. "But Franz is angry, is he not? Perhaps you are unwise to offend him."

"Why?" she asked, simply, and drew her hand away, looking up at him with

frank, sweet eyes, that yet held the shadow of some dim trouble.

He laughed a little uncomfortably.

"Perhaps he loves you, and would marry you, and then you would have a home, and no need to trouble yourself about the future."

The rosy colour flushed all over her fair face.

"Oh no—no!" she cried, eagerly; "I could not—I have never thought of such a thing. And Franz—oh, I do not like him at all. He is fierce and rude, and he thinks so much of himself, because he will have the farm, and the girls of the village all flatter him. But I—oh, no, I should never think of him as—as you say."

"You are a foolish little soul," he answered, smiling, but not ill pleased, after

all, at the frank confession. "Why are you turning that way—do you wish to go home already?"

"It is getting late," she said, rather reluctantly; "I must return now."

"Will you walk here again to-morrow, after sunset?" he asked, impulsively. "I will bring you that book we were talking of, if you like. I think you said you could read German?"

"Yes; but not very well," she answered, diffidently. "And will you really bring me a book? You are very kind. I—I know I am stupid and ignorant, but indeed I do so wish to learn more, and to know more."

"I will help you if you will let me," he said, gently. "I may not be here very much longer, but while I am——"

A momentary compunction cut short

his speech. He knew how it might be, and she did not. He saw the pure white page of an innocent, fanciful girlhood lying there at his hand. Should he leave it a blank, or write upon it in those letters of fire that are never again to be erased?

As the thought crossed his mind, his eyes met hers in the soft summer dusk. They were anxious, pleading, and full of hidden depths of thought, emotion, passion—all that might be as fruit to the flower, as blossom to the bud.

"While I am," he went on, hurriedly, "I will teach you whatever you wish."

Her whole face glowed and brightened at his words.

"How can I thank you, sir?" she said.

"Perhaps—some day—I will tell you,"

he answered ; but she, not understanding, was silent.

How happy she felt walking homewards in that enchanted stillness, beneath the dusky boughs and gleaming, silver moon-rays ! How happy, even though old Hans was sleeping yonder in the gray shadows of the churchyard, and on all the wide earth she had neither kith nor kin to love or care for her.

Perhaps in all life there is no feeling so exquisite as that sweet, vague happiness of dawning love which nestles closely, shyly, to the heart, in no way to be expressed or explained, but capable of transfiguring every thought and emotion, and filling the soul to the very brim with its own sweet, fanciful possession.

Talking gravely, simply, earnestly,

frankly, turn by turn, so the two so strangely met and associated went on by the bright lake waters, parting only as they reached the village street, which was quite deserted now.

That night, as the girl knelt by her bed, and said her simple prayers, she found herself dimly wondering why that dread, cold weight of unhappiness seemed no longer to press its heavy hand upon her heart. Some new hope had sprung to life ; some faint gleam of sunlight had fallen across the path that sorrow had left so gloomy and so desolate.

It was with her when her eyes closed in slumber, it was with her still when in the clear, bright dawn she woke to hear the songs of the birds among the boughs, and the lowing of the cattle in the meadows. She rose and opened her

little lattice-window, and looked away over the dewy fields to where the great mountains lay still wrapped in dim mist. She had not been up there since Hans Krauss died, but she thought she would go this morning; that it would be sweet to feel once more the cool, rich air on those lofty heights, to see the gray, soft shadows melt beneath the sun-rays, and feel the old sweet thrill of wonder and delight, as she looked down at the sleeping Canton, and tranquil waters far below.

She was soon dressed, and out, and climbing the steep path which led up beside the nearly completed railway. She met no one till half-way up the ascent, and then, with a strange little thrill of anger and dislike, she found herself confronted by Franz Brühl.

“You are up early,” he said with a

grim smile. "Are you going to meet the fine gentleman who was with you last night?"

She looked up at him, her eyes dark with sudden anger.

"I go to meet no one," she answered, curtly, "only to see the sunrise. It seems so long since I have been there," she added, sadly, as she looked up towards the Rigi Kulm.

He looked at her closely, then turned as if to bear her company, for she was moving on.

"My mother was vexed you would not come last night," he said presently. "And it is not wise of you to be about so much with the *Herr Ingenieur*. Gentlemen such as he are not fit company for peasant maidens, so my mother says, and so I think too."

"Your mother is very kind to interest herself in what I do," the girl answered, proudly. "And yesterday was only the second time I have spoken to the gentleman. He was so kind to my father. And why should I not speak to him, or let him walk with me, if he wishes? There is nothing wrong in that."

"At present—no," answered Franz, moodily. "But if it goes on, one cannot tell. I do not like you to talk so familiarly with strangers."

"You—do not like it?" she echoed, wonderingly. "What is it to you? You are not my father, or my brother, Franz."

"No," he answered, in the same sullen way. "Perhaps it would be better if I were. I would tell that fine aristocrat to keep his distance, and not be trying to make honest girls discontented."

The warm, indignant colour flushed rosily into the girl's cheeks.

"I am glad you are *not* my brother," she said, hastily. "You are rude, and rough, and unkind. You never did like me to have any pleasure or amusement. I wish you would not mind about me or what I do. There are so many other girls in the village, and they are prettier and well dowered, and they think so much of you. Why do you not go to them?"

He looked at her with a half-stupid, half-admiring glance, and his bronzed face grew a shade paler.

"You know very well I care for none of the village girls," he answered, sullenly. "I like you better than any of them, and I will marry you at once, if you will only say yes; and you need not

trouble about your future, or work hard as you said you would, and my mother will welcome you, though you are only a nameless child, and can bring no store of linen, or dowry of any sort in your hand. But we are well-to-do, and that does not matter, and they know I have set my heart on you, though indeed there is rich Käthchen, the vine-grower's daughter, whom I might have for the asking, and pretty Thérèse, too, for the matter of that, and——"

"I should advise you, then, to ask them," interrupted Edelweiss, indignantly. "I do not like you—no, nor never did—and I do not wish to marry."

For an instant her companion stood still, and stared at her as if discrediting his senses.

"You—will—not—marry—me?" he

jerked out, abruptly, and then laughed rudely and long. "Perhaps you think I am not in earnest, but I am. You had better think it over. You will not get such an offer twice," he said at last. "You know you are only a peasant, and have not even a name to call your own. You will have to live by yourself, and work hard for your daily bread, and it is no use letting your head run on books, and fine gentlemen, and such-like follies. Every one knows what that leads to."

He stopped abruptly, for something in the girl's white, indignant face shamed his rough taunts.

"You have forced your company on me," she said. "I did not wish for it, and you have no right to insult me because now I have no one to protect me. I—I cannot help about my name; and has

not Father Joseph told us that it is what we do that brings us respect—not what we are? And now I have said all, and I do not wish you to speak to me again. If my father had been alive you would not have dared to offer me such insults; it is cowardly, and I—I hate you! I wish I might never see your face again!"

She broke down into bitter weeping, for anger was rare with her, and her rage and indignation surprised herself. As for Franz, he only stood still and stared at her with lowering brows and angry eyes. Then she turned and fled past him into the woods beyond, and he knew it was useless to follow, or attempt to make peace, until her first feelings of wrath and indignation had spent themselves.

"Hate me!" he muttered to himself as he went down the steep, rough path. "That is his doing. Let him look to himself. I swear he shall never win what he has made me lose!"

CHAPTER IV.

DIVIDED DUTY.

FDELWEISS remained on the mountain all that day. She made a simple meal of bread-and-milk at the restaurant, where she was well known, and spent the long bright hours in wandering to and fro the old familiar haunts which she had been wont to traverse with Hans Krauss.

Her mind was unsettled and ill at ease. Its simple peace had been rudely disturbed by the words of her rough admirer, and she felt half reluctant and

half ashamed at the thought of meeting the young Austrian again. And yet his presence, his manner, the charm of refinement in his voice, all had a strange, indefinable attraction for her ; besides which he had promised the key to those charmed gates of knowledge she so longed to unlock ; he had it in his power to reveal those stores of wonder and delight on which her eyes so longed to gaze.

She felt she could not endure to go down to the village, to hear the babble of gossip, the chatter of the women, the rough jests of the men, or meet the curious eyes of the Frau Landbauerin Brühl, and be questioned as to her refusal of the previous evening's invitation. So she spent a strange, restless day, full of phantasies, and dreams, and regrets, and vague dissatisfaction, which in no way

could she analyse or set at rest. The sunset hour found her once more in the chestnut walk by the water-side, and there, too, was the figure she already seemed to know so well, and the face whose smile had haunted her the whole long day.

"I have brought you the books," he said, smiling; then paused suddenly, reading, with instinctive sympathy, the trouble and sadness of her face. "What is the matter?" he asked, quickly. "Has any one been vexing you?"

"Yes," she said, flushing a little beneath his grave and earnest gaze. "But it is nothing. I—I have almost forgotten it now."

He accepted the excuse, and, to put her at her ease, began to speak of the books, and then of his own work, and the various

difficulties of the strange railroad whose construction had ever held for her so curious a fascination. She listened with even more than her wonted eagerness, though she spoke but little.

More than ever she felt the charm of manner, and recognised the difference that lay between herself and her companion. Franz Brühl had been right. She would never be anything but a peasant—a little, homely, ignorant, nameless thing, whose only joy would be the memory of some rare golden hour like this, whose flying feet she would fain have stayed.

Why did the thought pain her now? Why did the presence of this one man affect her in so strange a fashion? These questions she could not answer, being as yet in that blind and perplexed state which is only half conscious of pleasure and of

pain, yet satisfied to bear both in equal measure so long as the giver of them is not absent, or neglectful, or unkind.

They parted again in the sweet summer dusk, and the girl went home with her books to that one room which had been her usual winter quarters, and where she had chosen to remain for the present. The cottage belonged to an old wood-carver and his wife—kind and homely people, who loved the child with great tenderness, and were pleased to have her under their roof. They questioned her as to her long absence, but she only said she had been on the mountain, and they were satisfied. Then, when the simple evening meal was over, she bade them good-night, and took a candle and went up to her own little room and sat herself down to peruse her new treasure.

By the help of dictionary and grammar she managed to comprehend very fairly the passages marked out for her, and her natural aptitude and quickness made the task of learning an easy one. She went on with that task far into the night, her mind absorbed in the new interests awakened, and the new fancies stimulated.

The next day was wet and dreary. She did not go out at all, but helped old Käthe with the household work; and then, when the old woman sat down to her knitting, she took out her books once more and plunged afresh into the studies she had set herself.

That night, when the old wood-carver came home, he looked angered and disturbed, and the sight of Edelweiss and her books seemed to vex him more.

"Is it true what they are saying in

the village, that thou hast a gentleman for thy lover?” he asked her, abruptly. “A pretty thing truly for one like thee to set at nought old friends and faithful, for a young sprig of an aristocrat, who would never give thee a serious thought! Thou hast deeply offended the good Brühls, and every one knows that Franz thought much of thee, and indeed thou mightest have married him, and never have troubled about work, or known want or care.”

The girl lifted her pale, absorbed face. She was still in a half-dream, and scarce took in the meaning of this harangue.

“I do not like Franz Brühl,” she said, simply. “I would work all day, and every day, for my bread, sooner than owe it to him. And indeed I do not know why his people should be angered with me. I have done no wrong to them.”

"Thou art but a foolish child, and no wiser than a baby," grumbled the old man. "Hans Krauss would be fine and angered did he but know what thou hast done. But thy head only runs on books and learning, and what will they do for thee? Not make thy bread, or earn thy clothes, I'll be bound—only spoil thee for honest work, and simple folk, such as thou hast been brought up amongst."

"Ah no," said the girl, gently, "I will never alter to you, or any one who has been kind to me, and it is cruel to speak as if I had done wrong, or been bold and forward with the *Herr Ingenieur*. He has spoken to me but thrice, and he lent me books because I am so ignorant, and wish so much to learn the German as it is spoken and written, and I am sure my father would not have minded that, or,

indeed, anything that he has said or done. Only, of course, you—you do not know."

"Nay, truly I do not," grumbled the old man; "only I bid thee be careful, and take heed to thyself. And as I said before, what dost thou want with books and learning? They are for ladies and gentlemen, not for peasants like thee, and thy mind will only be filled with discontent."

"That is true," nodded old Käthe, clicking her needles sharply in the chimney-corner. "Look at me. I cannot read a printed character—no, not to save my life. I never was the worse wife for that, though. And when one can make the most of a kreutzer, and cook, and spin, and hoe, it is all one needs. But I told Hans Krauss thou wert ever too fond of book-learning, only he spoilt thee so, and would never listen to any one else."

The girl rose to her feet, her face burning, her eyes hot and bright.

"I do no harm," she said; "I can work as well with my hands, though I do not shut up my brains. If the good God had wished us all to be ignorant, He would not have put it into men's minds to write the wonderful and beautiful things they have done."

"Oh, thou canst please thyself," said the old woman; "thou art a strange girl, and not like most of our maidens. But indeed thou art more than foolish to offend the Brühls, for they are people of influence and note, and to have Franz for thy lover would indeed be a feather in thy cap, and——"

"Franz—always Franz! Oh, how I hate the name!" cried the girl, with sudden petulance, and she moved to-

wards the open door. There on the very threshold stood the obnoxious individual whose name she had just uttered.

For an instant their eyes met, and the hot, swift colour rushed all over her beautiful, fair face.

"I—I came to ask you to forgive me for angering you yesterday," said the young man, almost humbly. "I spoke too suddenly, and I was rude. Will you not be friends once more?"

"Friends!" echoed the girl; "oh, yes, Franz; I bear you no ill-will. But I do not like you to follow me about, or interfere with me. You have no right."

"I am sorry," he repeated, doggedly, not looking at her, but speaking as if he were repeating a hard and disagreeable lesson.

"Come in, Franz; come in," cried the old man at this moment. "The girl is but a girl, and they never know what they would be after. She is sorry enough to have angered thee, I doubt not. Come in and take thy supper with us, and we will have in a jug of beer, and be merry as of old."

Franz needed no second invitation. He had made up his mind to keep friends with Edelweiss, and watch her proceedings narrowly. Pique, and anger, and jealousy were at work in his heart, but he smothered them down and hid them from sight beneath an appearance of cheerful good-humour, which to Edelweiss was certainly trying, though to the old people it seemed delightful.

The girl was thankful when the meal was over and the things cleared away.

Franz rose to take his leave then, and she went with him to the door. The rain had ceased. A brilliant moon flooded all the street with light, and the rough houses and pavements looked almost beautiful in the clear, translucent glow.

The girl stood silent for a moment, her eyes glowing with delight as they took in the beauty of the scene. The young man watched her intently. Then he took her hand.

“Good-night,” he said, softly ; “ we are friends now, are we not ? ”

She roused herself with a sigh.

“ Friends ?—oh, yes,” she murmured, dreamily. “ Only do not be foolish any more, Franz.”

As they stood thus, hand-in-hand, with the lovely moonlight bathing the girl’s rapt

face and slender figure, some one came quickly down the street and saw them, and a keen pang of anger and pain shot through his heart.

He passed on and made no sign, but the girl started and drew her hand away, her cheeks flushing like a June rose.

"Good-night again," she said, timidly, and went within and shut the door, feeling a sudden glow of anger and of shame tingling in her veins.

"He must have seen," she thought to herself, "and he might have spoken only a word."

Only a word! Had it come to this already, that the failure of a greeting could sadden and perplex her, and fill her innocent heart with such pitiful unrest?

She went to her own room, and looked

out of the tiny window, but all that wondrous alchemy of moonlight seemed only dark and desolate, and a pain so cruel and so strange throbbed in her breast that she felt frightened of it and of herself.

The tears fell down her cheeks. The loneliness of her life seemed to appal her as it came home in this one moment, when there was neither love, nor sympathy, nor counsel at hand, and all the world looked desolate and cold. That night the books lay on the little bare table unopened.

"Of what use," she was saying to herself, "of what use to learn—to labour—to try and improve myself? No one cares. No one will ever care again!"

That one moment of jealousy on the

one side, of pain at a causeless neglect on the other, had done more to knit those two dissimilar lives together than either of them imagined.

For many days Edelweiss studiously avoided the path by the lake, or the ascent of the mountain. She kept in the house and worked hard, and gave up all her leisure moments to study, and tried effectually to shut out all thought of the young engineer from her mind. If his memory would still intrude, it was from no fault of hers, though she was not wise enough to know that the endeavour to abstain from thinking of any particular person is the surest way to bring such thoughts to the mind.

As for Conrad von Reichenberg, he tried to convince himself that only a very natural curiosity as to her progress in her

studies prompted him to pass up that street on these moonlight evenings ; but he saw nothing of the girl, and grew restless and angered as day after day passed on.

One morning, however, he met her by the lake some two hours after sunrise. In the gladness and surprise of seeing her again, he almost forgot his jealous fears of Franz Brühl, and walked on beside her, and talked to her so gaily and eagerly that her timidity gave way, and she, too, began to bask once more in the sunshine of a subdued, but conscious sympathy.

An innocent fancy such as hers wants so little to make it content. So little ! Alas ! that it should grow to mean so much. Just all that makes life worth the living, though we may not find out that fact until too late.

"Why would you not speak to me that night when you passed?" she asked him after a time, being, indeed, too open and too fearless to know anything of conventional scruples.

He looked a little ashamed.

"I—I am afraid I was jealous of your companion," he answered, with equal candour. "I did not like to see him holding your hand and looking up at your face in the moonlight. You told me you did not like him, and then I saw you thus."

For an instant she met his eyes in the old frank, fearless way. Then quite suddenly all her self-command seemed to fail. It mattered to him if another man looked at her—touched her—cared for her!

She would have been untrue to every instinct of her sex, had not that

one fact opened her eyes to the consciousness of her own power.

She walked on by his side utterly speechless, but, oh, so wonderfully, intensely happy! All this time—all these weary days and hours she had been vexing herself with thoughts of his forgetfulness and neglect, and now to hear the real reason! A wonderful, perfect happiness seemed to fall upon her life. In the golden haze of sunshine she saw but one face, one smile.

The young Austrian read the sudden change in her face with a mingled sense of triumph and regret. It smote him to the heart that this young, radiant, fearless life was so completely at his mercy, was so content to take happiness or sorrow at his hands. So short a time had he known her, and yet—— A sigh cut short the

thought. Involuntarily he said to himself : "How she would love me if I willed it—" and then resolved he would not so will it. He would go away, she would forget ; there would be no harm done, and then ? Well then—— At that very moment a black shadow fell across their pathway, and before them stood Franz Brühl. He gave them a sullen greeting, a meaning look, and then passed on.

All the golden beauty of the day was spoilt for both.

Conrad said to himself :

"If I leave her she will be his—that boor's ! What a life ! At least, with me she would be happy."

And the girl shuddered with a sudden dread, remembering the evil look and smile of the man whose love she had rejected.

The spell was broken. The golden sunshine no longer wrapped them in its mystic haze. With one accord they turned and went back to the village, absorbed, and restless, and half ashamed.

"Yes," said the young engineer to himself again and again as the long day dragged itself to eventide; "I must go away from here. I must be wise for—her, if not for myself. She is so good, and innocent, and fair. It would be base to spoil her life. And yet—oh, how I wish there were no such thing as a divided duty!"

CHAPTER V.

AN EXPERIMENT.

HAT same evening, old Kätke sent the girl on some errands.

When they were done, she took the path through the chestnut-wood, and walked slowly on till she reached the little hotel by the lake waters, where tourists and travellers from Luzern usually stayed.

The lighted rooms and the pretty wooden balcony were all filled with people, many of whom had come to see the ceremony of opening the railway. Gay

groups were sitting at the little tables. There were beautiful colours and fair faces: there were flowers, and fruit, and crystal on the tables, and busy waiters bustling to and fro. The girl paused for an instant, and looked at one of the groups on the balcony. There were two women—fair, young, exquisitely dressed, and talking and laughing with them, in gay fashion, was Conrad von Reichenberg.

He did not see her. She moved hurriedly away, her heart beating with slow, heavy throbs.

The difference between them came home to her in that moment as it had never done before.

"He is of their world. What can I be to him?" she thought to herself, and the hot tears dimmed her sight.

The vision of those beautiful women

rose before her again and again. They were of his rank, his order; and he had looked so gay and happy, talking and laughing there in the moonlight.

Then a terror fell on her, unlike any feeling she had ever experienced. Why should his actions be of such importance? Why should smile or word of his, lighten or darken her life?

Not even to her own heart could she answer these questions. She felt stifled, terrified, oppressed. She forgot the hour and everything else, and hurried on till she reached the little churchyard where Hans Krauss lay buried. There she threw herself on his grave, and buried her face in the dew-wet turf, and cried as if her heart would break.

For several succeeding days the girl only saw the young Austrian in the

company of the same two women. She never spoke or looked at him, and he never attempted to detain her.

Indeed, he was in sore perplexity himself. His stepmother and the beautiful girl who was his father's ward were inexorable in their demands on his time, and he was obliged to dance attendance on their whims from morning till night. It had always been an understood thing that he should one day marry the Fräulein von Erfurt, who was an orphan, and a ward of his father's, and very rich; but never had that tacit acceptance of his fate come home to him so unpleasantly as at the present moment. She was beautiful and refined, and highly accomplished, and yet she had no power to touch his heart.

Even the good-natured tolerance and placid affection with which he had been

used to regard her, failed him now. He had grown impatient, cold, resentful; and her raillery and badinage on the subject drove him nearly desperate.

"When once the line is opened, they will go," he said to himself with a sense of relief, and was rejoiced when the important day came, and the first trial of the railway was pronounced a perfect success.

The whole village had turned out to watch the strange, slow engine and its quaint car creep slowly up that steep ascent. It seemed incredible that such a thing could be done, and yet there, before their eyes, was the miracle being accomplished. Edelweiss was among the crowd, and watched breathlessly as the passenger-car crept slowly, slowly up, pushed on by the locomotive at a steady, equal

speed of some three miles an hour. The engineers were in the car, and she recognised the handsome, eager face of Conrad von Reichenberg.

She felt sick and cold as she stood gazing up at the almost perpendicular slope. She knew the train could be stopped anywhere, and at any moment. Still, it looked perilous in the extreme, and she shuddered and hid her eyes, and thought of the risk more than of the wonder and triumph.

The eyes of the young Austrian were on her, and he saw the sudden gesture. It touched him as nothing else could have done. He knew perfectly well for whom her heart ached with fear and terror.

"I will see her to-night," he said to himself. "Poor little, tender, innocent soul!"

As the train went round the first curve, the girl turned away. She could not bear to look at it. She thought of that terrible bridge spanning the gorge — a spider-thread between earth and air. Her whole soul shuddered and grew sick. She turned away from the chattering, eager crowd, and went down to the waterside, and took her book and sat down to read in a quiet little shady place, where no one was likely to come. Her time was all her own. The wood-carver and his wife were going to spend the evening with a neighbour. She was free to roam where she would.

The interest in her book, and the consciousness of her own progress, soon absorbed her, and she lost all count of time. Only at last a voice that was like music to her ears, sounded through the

stillness of the woods, and made her spring to her feet with a sudden little cry of joy. She saw Conrad von Reichenberg.

"Where have you hidden yourself all these days?" he asked her, looking down with kindling eyes at the face so softly flushed, at the drooping lids, and loose, rich hair that made her dower of beauty.

"I—I have been always in the village," she answered, trembling. "You saw me often, I think; only you did not speak. I did not expect it. You had those beautiful ladies with you."

He smiled a little.

"True. And did you mind very much that I avoided you—although, believe me, it was not for the sake of the beautiful ladies, but your own?"

"My own?" she echoed. "I do not understand."

"Sit down again, and I will explain," he said, gently, as he sank down on the soft green turf. "You see, my child, there is some one who cares for you very much, and he is jealous, and watches you very closely. I feared you might anger him, and he would be a cruel enemy, I fancy."

"You mean Franz Brühl," she said, growing suddenly pale. "Ah, I do not care for him, or what he thinks. He has nothing to do with me."

"I am glad of that," said the young man, gravely, "for I should not like you to be fond of him — though, indeed, it should not matter to me one way or other. And now tell me, are you glad to see me safe again? You did not stay long to watch the Rigi-Bahn."

"No," she said, with a shudder. "It

was horrible ; it looked so dangerous. I thought all the time — oh, if anything should happen to—to——"

"To me, dear?" he asked, gently.
"And would you care so much?"

She raised her eyes, and the look of passionate admiration in their depths startled him.

"Ah yes," she said, in a strange suppressed voice. "How can I help it? You have been so kind and so good."

"No—no," he disclaimed, eagerly ; "you are too grateful, little one. Like all your sex, you rush into one of two extremes. You take all and give nothing, or you take nothing and give all. And how did you like the books?" he went on. "Were they very difficult?"

"No," she answered, with a glad smile ;
"I can read them quite well. I have

nearly finished one. Shall I read you some?"

"No, not now," he said, gravely; "I want to talk to you. It seems a long time since we had a chat—does it not?"

"Yes," she answered, looking at him with all her soul in her eyes, too utterly radiant and content for any fear or grief to cross her memory now. "But why should you care to speak to me when you have—them?" she added, nodding her head in the direction of the gay little hotel where she knew his friends were staying.

"Why?" he said, slowly. "Why does one prefer night to morn, or shade to sun, or anything that is cool and restful, and simple and innocent, in contrast to what is garish, and brilliant, and loud? The brightness and the brilliance dazzle, but

they tire one; the coolness and the simplicity refresh as well as rest. Does Franz ever tell you you are beautiful?" he added, irrelevantly.

She started a little.

"Oh no; I do not think he would notice anything like that," she said, simply. "We have grown up together since childhood. I do not suppose he thinks much about what I am."

"Ah yes, he does," answered her companion; "and he hates me in proportion to those thoughts. Tell me, child, have you a faithful memory? Would you soon forget?"

"Not any one I loved, or who had been good to me," she answered, readily.

"When I go away," he went on slowly, not looking at her, but keenly conscious of the growing whiteness of face and lips,

"do you think you will remember me for—for a little while, Edelweiss?"

Again that thrill of pain and terror ran through the girl's veins. Her eyes sank, her heart beat slowly and painfully.

"For all my life," she said at last, with a strange despairing sadness that smote him to the heart. He looked at her silently and long. Right and wrong, duty and desire, set and arrayed themselves before him. She herself was not fully conscious of what her words betrayed; but he knew it all, and read her heart like an open book, and knew, too, that never again on its white pages would there be aught but that dark shadow of himself, standing between her and all the sunshine of her simple life.

"Do you mean that, really?" he asked, not, indeed, from cruelty, but from that

innate sense of vanity and proprietorship which makes up so large a sum in most men's love.

"I have never told you what is not true," she answered, simply, and her lips quivered like those of a grieved child.

With a sudden overmastering impulse he drew her to him and kissed them.

"For all your life," he murmured, passionately. "Oh, child—child, and I shall think of you for all mine!"

She rested there against him, quite passive, quite silent, only her cheeks were crimson as any rose, and her eyes dared not meet his own.

"Fate is very hard on me," he said presently with a heavy sigh. "If I were free, if I could do as I pleased with my life, we would never part again, my child, you and I."

"Are men not always free?" she asked, faintly.

The touch of his lips seemed still to thrill her senses, and the blue sky and the sunny leaves were hazy and indistinct. Half shyly she drew herself away from his arm, and he made no effort to detain her.

"Indeed, no," he answered, his face growing dark and troubled. "Sometimes it is their own follies that make their shackles—sometimes it is the force of necessity. With me, I think it is a mixture of both."

She listened, still in a half dream. That caress, that touch, that soft, sweet, unutterable delight which had throbbed in heart and pulse, were still too new to be forgotten. Nothing else seemed to matter very much just then.

"You—you do not quite understand, I think," he went on, as she did not speak. "Perhaps you do not believe it will cost me any pain to leave you?"

"Why should it?" she asked, simply. "You are so wise and great, and your life is all so different. I am only a little peasant. You would be ashamed, no doubt, if those beautiful ladies saw you with me. I think you have only meant to be kind to me, because you were sorry I should be so lonely, and so ignorant."

"I don't know why you should persist in saying I have been kind to you," he said, gloomily; "and you are not ignorant—only simple and innocent of soul, and that is worth any other knowledge."

She looked at him wistfully with her soft, troubled eyes. It seemed wonderful that he should think of her at all.

"You say that because you wish to please me with myself. But I know what I am, and what I must seem to you beside—beside others."

"How those—others—trouble you!" he said, with a half smile. "You have no need to be jealous. You have cost me a great deal more thought than those ladies, I assure you."

"And you are going away," she said, with a little catch in her breath. "Shall you ever come back, do you think?"

For a moment he was silent, wrestling with a temptation whose strength she could not understand. In the golden evening light she looked so fair and appealing; there was such sweet trouble in her eyes—such childish beauty in the rosy lips, that he felt the task he had set himself was indeed a hard one. From the first

he had never meant to be more than friendly and good-natured to her ; he could not account, even to himself, for the change that had come over his feelings.

And now she loved him, though she hardly knew it, and when he went away her life would be harder, colder, more lonely than ever !

“I do not think I shall come back,” he said at last, “or, at least, not for many years. Perhaps you will have married Franz Brühl by that time,” he added, somewhat bitterly.

She grew very white.

“Oh no,” she said, below her breath. “It is unkind of you to say that.”

“Well, some one else, if not Franz Brühl,” he went on, lightly.

“If only you would come back some time,” she said, piteously, appalled by the

sudden sense of desolation his words had brought.

He bent down and took her trembling hands in both his own.

"Listen!" he said. "When I was years younger than I am now, a beautiful child came to dwell in my home. My father was her guardian, and we grew up together. As time passed on we were betrothed. I did not love her as—as men love sometimes—but she was fair and good, and fond of me, and I knew that some day we should marry. Then I came here, and I saw—you. Perhaps you will not believe me if I tell you how I have grown to care for you above and beyond all others whom I have met and known—above even the duty that I owe another. But whether you believe it or not, child,

it is true. Now you know all. But there is one thing that you do not know, and that is that for your sake I am ready to break faith and honour, and set myself free. If you tell me that you love me—if you bid me do this, I will do it for——”

“Oh no—no!” she cried, wildly. “You are wronging yourself. A promise is a sacred thing—so my father always told me, and one should always keep the word one has pledged. And, after all,” she added, more calmly, “what could I be to you? I am not of your order. I should only shame you, and all the love I could bring would not alter that. I—I only knew how different I was when I saw her. If—if sometimes I saw you—if I thought you would come back

just once or twice as the years go on, I should be happy enough. I could not ask for more, or accept it."

"Then," he said, coldly, "you do not love me. For I could not be content to see you set yourself so far apart from me. But you do not mind whether I am unhappy."

She looked at him with so piteous a reproach, that it silenced him.

"How can it be in my power to make you that?" she said. "You have so fair a life before you, and I can only be a memory. It will be nothing to you that you ever saw me when once you are back in the great world again."

Amidst the pain and anger of his heart, her simple words went home to

him as a plain truth always does. Forgetfulness would be so easy to him in comparison with herself. She was only a little mountain flower, blooming fair and sweet in her humble solitude. To transplant her would be cruel, to pluck her for his own selfish fancy would be base, and he knew well enough that no love outlasts a shamed pride, or bridges an unequal distance.

"Tell me which it shall be," he said again. "There is no reason why you should not be my wife, if you will. You have native grace and aptitude, and you are beautiful as a dream, and are quick to learn. Besides, half my life is spent in travelling, and no one would know."

She rose slowly to her feet. How

could she tell him that the very fact of making excuses such as these, only served to show her how great must be the need of them?

"You have pledged your word," she said, gently. "You must keep it. Do not think of me. It is not your fault that I cannot forget."

"But stay!" he cried, springing hastily up; "your words seem like a reproach. I can never forgive myself if I have made you unhappy."

"You only meant to be kind," she said, gently. "I shall always remember that. And I will think of you in your great world and in your own life—for she loves you, no doubt, and you will wed her, as you have promised; and for me—it does not matter for me—I, who

have not even a name to call my own."

Her tears fell softly. She moved away, but in a second he was beside her, and had drawn the drooping, golden head down on his breast.

"You might be happy, and I also, if only you would listen," he murmured, tenderly, and once again he bent and touched her lips. She trembled, and turned cold.

"Do not ask me," she said, piteously. "There is only right and wrong. There is no middle course. Oh, you know that just as well as I myself! Oh, let me go now! You are cruel to me."

He released her in a moment.

"It is you who are cruel," he said, with sudden anger. "And you do not love me. If you did——"

But she had fled away down the little path like a startled hare. Only at his feet lay the books he had lent her.

He stooped down and picked them up, and then went on through the green woods, restless, and angered, and miserably conscious of some wrong he had done, and vainly sought to excuse.

CHAPTER VI.

REMORSE.

ONRAD VON REICHENBERG was in no mood that night to listen to his step-mother's gay chatter, or his *fiancée's* graceful platitudes.

He could not set his heart or his conscience at rest. He could not forget the look of those sorrowful blue eyes, whose dumb reproach had said more than any words.

True, he might say to himself, "I have done her no harm." And he did say it again and again, but all the time he

knew that the pure, innocent content of her life was spoilt for ever. That though he might forget, she never would.

He was not a bad man, as men go. That he had not felt it in his power to deny himself the amusement or interest brought into some idle hours, could scarcely have seemed a sin in the eyes of that world amidst which he moved.

He had said no word, breathed no thought, which might sully the purity of that beautiful, simple soul, but all the same he had sapped its content, destroyed its serenity, and killed its peace.

"If only I were free!" he sighed to himself to-night, standing apart there on the little wooden balcony, looking out with moody, clouded eyes at the shining waters and the pretty moonlit village. "I would

marry her then, let the world say what it might."

So ran his thoughts, in that strain of self-exculpation which few are honest enough to cast aside, even to their own selves. But he knew he would have done no such thing, for his love, sincere as he deemed it, was not the love that bears the test of the world's ridicule.

Still, he was young enough to have something of the poet in his heart, and this romance of the mountains had touched him very deeply, and left a lasting sorrow for that brave and unprotected life over which the shadow of his own had fallen.

So he felt discontented with himself and the world at large, and took himself away to solitude and self-commiseration, and blamed fate, as is the way

with mortals when fate means something they desire irrationally, without chance of obtaining it. He had done many worse things in his life, and they had cost him no single pang of self-reproach; he could not understand why he should suffer such remorse now.

Finally he threw away his cigar, and went down through the grounds and up the little street with its quaint, pretty houses, and stood looking up at one window, where a light was burning.

No shadow fell across the blind; no face looked out—Juliet fashion—at the stars. He might long and wait as he pleased, there was no response from that aching heart within to the waiting heart without. Tired at last with his unrewarded vigil, he turned away.

A shadow stole out from a doorway close at hand, and dogged his steps at safe and unseen distance.

Had the young Austrian seen it, or the evil face whose murderous hatred followed him like a threat of doom, he might have gone to his rest that night with a heart even more troubled and disquieted than he knew his own to be.

Meanwhile, the girl into whose soul he had driven the first subtleties of doubt, was spending long, miserable hours in the endeavour to ease this new and cruel pain. Of course, it was her own fault that she suffered. How could she have known that a few kind words—a few simple attentions—the memory of a handsome face and winning manner, were to bring such an overwhelming change into

her life? She seemed to have drifted out upon an unknown sea; its dangers appalled—its rough depths terrified her. The intensity of her own feelings seemed quite disproportionate to the simple cause which had awakened them; yet between them all she only saw the light of one face, and felt the glory of one presence.

"If my father were here he would help me," she moaned again and again. "But I have no one now—no one; and he—oh, I ought not even to think of him. I have no right to a thought, or a word of his. They all belong to the beautiful lady who will be his wife; his wife—and yet he said he loved me. Ah, it could not have been true!"

Her face grew scarlet as she thought of the kiss that had touched it, of the eyes

which had gazed on it. In those eyes she had been beautiful — if only for a time—if only for those brief, bright hours when he had lingered by her side in the chestnut-woods, and talked to her as if no barrier of rank or honour divided their lives.

Well, at least she would have that memory. She had been strong enough to resist the tempting of her own heart, and of his own pleading. There could be no harder thing for her to do in all the days to come, and he would soon go away now, and then she would, perhaps, feel the pain less sharply, and grow to be content with his memory only. She could not blame him for what he had done—for trying to enlighten her ignorance and bring some little happiness into her life; she could not tell him that he had left desolation

where all had been peace and content. Ah no! for love was teaching her what, indeed, it teaches most human lives—that it is better to have known its hour of joy and its lifetime of regret, than never to have felt the pain of the one atoned for by the memory of the other.

So the light burned on at her lattice, watched by eyes that were despairing, and eyes that were fiercely jealous, while hers were blind with tears, and quenched in heavy sorrow.

"There is something wrong with the new railway," said Franz Brühl the next morning, looking in at the cottage as he passed. "They will take no passengers to-day."

Edelweiss looked eagerly up; some-

thing in the malicious tone and face struck sharply on her notice.

“What is wrong?” she asked, calmly.

“Oh, it is only a trifle,” he answered.

“But the chief engineer and the Herr von Reichenberg have had a dispute. The young man, to prove his views are correct, is going to make a trial by himself. Only he and the stoker are to take the train up and down the mountain.”

The girl’s face grew very pale.

“Is there any danger?” she asked, hurriedly.

Franz laughed brutally.

“That is his look-out, or—as the devil wills,” he said, turning away. “Good morning! I have no time to waste. I take the boat to Fluelen; I have business there.”

Edelweiss scarcely heard him. A sudden

fear had fallen upon her heart; she shivered in the bright, warm sunshine. All the rest of the morning she went about her usual homely tasks like one in a dream. At noon she went down the street, determined to ask if the news were true.

Yes, she was told, the trial was to be made in another hour.

The girl went back to the cottage, where old Käthe was nodding in the chimney-corner.

"I am going up the mountain," she said. "Do not be anxious if I have not returned by supper-time."

Then she hurried away, and took the familiar path which she had trodden year by year with Hans Krauss. It was so warm and still in those green solitudes, with the blue waters gleaming far below,

and the blue sky shining far above, that the girl's heart grew lighter, and her fears began to fade. Why should any harm happen to him to-day, more than any other day? Was he not clever enough and brave enough to defy danger—if, indeed, there were any to defy, save that which her own foolish fears had built up on account of this enterprise?

Midway up the ascent she paused. In a little nook, sheltered and concealed by thick trees, she could see the train making its way along the line. She resolved to lie hidden there and watch it.

Already she could discern the white smoke, and hear the faint puffs of the engine. Trembling like a leaf, she looked down from her vantage-point, and saw the little train creeping in its strange, slow fashion

up the almost perpendicular side of the mountain.

She held her breath, and her heart grew cold and sick. It was terrible to watch it, and yet a strange fascination held her eyes glued to the spot.

On, on—nearer and nearer—it glided slowly and surely up. She could see the figures quite distinctly now. No one was in the car itself. The engine-driver and one other figure were visible, and the guard who worked the brake, stood in the end compartment.

It was crossing the Schnürtobel bridge now—that frail structure which, from her altitude, looked like a plank thrown across the dizzy gorge it spanned.

It crept safely over the bridge, and she breathed again.

On, still on, higher and higher, she watched it move, with steady and almost equal speed. Then it reached the Kaltbad station, and she saw it no more.

There was nothing to do now but watch for the descent, which to an onlooker seemed even more perilous and alarming than the ascent, in consequence of the steep inclination of the line. To go down an altitude of twenty to twenty-five degrees is bad enough, but to watch such a process is enough to make the strongest brain turn giddy and faint.

The girl, from her little nook, commanded a large extent of the line, and while waiting for the train to come once more in view, she sat gazing dreamily at the bridge.

The afternoon was growing late now, and some heavy clouds had almost hidden

the sun. Across the stillness of the air broke one low, distinct thunder-clap. She started, and looked anxiously up, scanning the western horizon, where the storm threatened to burst.

As her eyes turned once more to the long incline, she saw far below, on the little bridge, the outline of a human figure. The glowing obscurity and the heavy shadows made it difficult to discern what the figure was about, and she followed its strange and hurried movements with wondering eyes.

Then, suddenly as a lightning-flash, a thought struck her, and she sprang to her feet with a low, terrified cry. All the blood left her face and seemed to curdle in her veins, and her limbs shook so that she could scarcely stand.

At the same moment a loud, shrill whistle sounded through the sultry stillness.

The train was about to leave the station, and make its descent.

That sound brought back the life to her heart, the strength to her limbs. She dashed out of her retreat, and, fleet as an antelope, she flew down the path, crashing now and then through the bushes, taking every short cut with which long habit had made her familiar, her whole mind filled with but one frenzied longing—to reach the railway-line, and from thence the bridge where that fatal barrier lay.

“Shall I be in time? dear Heaven, shall I be in time?” she moaned as she sped on over the rough stones, and short, hard grass, and tangled brushwood.

The clouds were growing denser and blacker. There was not a sound in the air save once again that low, ill-omened mutter of the thunder rolling from height to height of the surrounding mountains.

She reached the line—the train was not yet in sight; but far below like a spider's strand lay the bridge, and she flew on with panting breath and straining eyes as a racer flies to its goal.

Nerve, and brain, and courage were strung to their highest tension. The life she loved far better than her own was in peril, and that peril it lay in her power alone to avert. Had she paused to think—had she in any way remembered the details explained to her by Conrad von Reichenberg, she would have known that a word—a signal, as the train passed her

by would have sufficed to stop it at any point on the line; but she could think of nothing now save the dastardly act she had witnessed, and the tragedy it threatened.

The road seemed long as it had never seemed before. The lines of her face grew set and rigid, her eyes looked black beneath their strained and aching lids, and still with headlong speed, and feet that dared not pause, she flew along the rugged mountain way.

One who had known her in her childish beauty would scarce have recognised her now, so altered was her face beneath this terrible strain. The swiftness of her speed made her dizzy, the rush of the blood through her veins turned her sick, but she never slackened speed, only rushed

on and on through the current of the cleft air and the dusky whirling shadows as though the death-shrieks of a doomed life were already ringing in her ears.

How long it was—how long ! How her feet stumbled and her limbs shook, and the quick breaths panted through her pale lips ! A child no longer, but a creature desperate and mute as death, and nerved to an ordeal from which the bravest man might well have shrunk.

The bridge—at last the bridge ! She seized the post as her feet touched the little structure, and for one moment paused and looked back to the slender line of rails. The train was in sight now, and moving more swiftly than she had seen it move yet.

There was not a second to lose. She

rushed forward ; in the very centre of the bridge, and drawn across the line, lay a huge log. In case that obstacle might be seen, and the train checked, the cog-line for the centre-wheel had been hewn away, and it would have been almost impossible to have stopped the train.

An accident—the slightest overthrow to the balance, and the whole thing must have been hurled over the bridge into the terrible depths of the gorge below. The girl's wild eyes took in the danger only too promptly. With all her strength she seized the huge block and strove to roll it aside.

Louder and longer rolled the thunder-echoes once again. Darker and denser fell the shadows all around. In the heavy gloom, she could scarcely see the

approaching train, though the sound of the engine's laboured beats was painfully distinct in the oppressive stillness of the air. The train was on the bridge. She could feel it throb beneath its weight. With one last effort of her almost failing strength, she seized the heavy log and moved it from the line. At that same moment her eyes fell on the rough and mangled rail, and recognised a new danger—perhaps a worse one.

There was no time for thought. As that new horror flashed upon her, there flashed also the sense that in the gathering darkness the train was close upon her. She rushed forward a few steps. A faint gleam through the darkening clouds showed the swaying figure nerved for one last effort.

“Stop!” she shrieked, wildly. “Stop!
The rails are loose!”

Then a sound as of a thousand hammers
clanged in her brain, and deaf, and blind,
and senseless, she fell face downwards across
the engine’s path.

CHAPTER VII.

THE WITHERED FLOWER.

“HAT is it? What is the matter?
Is she killed?”

The train had paused — motionless as the mountain itself. It seemed to Conrad von Reichenberg as if long hours had passed since the darkness was rent by that warning cry; since his own hand had seized the heavy brake and arrested the train in its downward course.

He was kneeling now beside a pros-

trate figure ; and in the dusky light he turned the white, cold face up to his own, and saw to whom he owed his life. The mangled rails, all jagged and hewn, told their own tale ; but he scarcely thought of that or his own recent peril, in the shock which the first look of this pale, altered face had brought.

"What is it? I hardly know," he muttered, stupidly, as the men crowded to his side. "Is she dead?"

There was a dark bruise on the white temples, where the engine had struck her. A second more—a foot of space—and she would have been crushed to atoms.

"She came to warn us, no doubt," said the driver, pityingly, as he lowered his lamp. "Only for the darkness and the storm, we should have seen her before. Poor child ! how white she is, and still.

What are we to do, Mein Herr? We can't get the train on till the line's mended."

Conrad scarcely seemed to hear him. His eyes were bent in agony on the girl's face. He knew he had never loved her as he loved her now, reading all the bravery and courage of the pulseless heart that thrilled no longer beneath his touch.

"Dead, and for my sake!" he groaned, as he saw the cold hand drop from his grasp, and the gray hue steal over the beautiful, calm face. "Oh, child—child, my little mountain flower! I was not worth such love as this!"

The full meaning of her sacrifice, the full strength of her devotion, came home to him in this hour at last, and shamed him for his own selfishness, which had only brought sorrow, and suffering, and death, upon this fair youth and innocent heart.

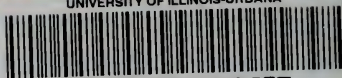
He suffered in this moment as in all his life he never could again, seeing laid at his feet in unasked devotion the beauty, and glory, and tenderness, and truth he had left unrecompensed.

The loud, slow thunder filled the air once more with warning sound, the pine-boughs rustled as they caught the wind, and so, with the music of her own mountains sounding her requiem, they bore her slowly homewards through the summer's dusk, with Heaven's light of peace upon her calm, dead face.

THE END.



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